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**ACADEMIC QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT (AQIP), A NEW
FORM OF ACCREDITATION AT EASTERN IOWA COMMUNITY
COLLEGE DISTRICT: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

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by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my committee including Dr. John Roueche, Dr. William Moore, Dr. Margot Perez-Greene, Dr. Norvell Northcutt, and Dr. James Fitzsimmons. Their guidance and support made this process enjoyable. It is also with fondness that I remember Dr. Donald Phelps, who was a committee member but sadly passed away in 2003. His smiles and encouragement were great motivators.

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Statement of the Problem: Accreditation is an imperfect and evolving system of quality and assessment for higher education and has been the subject of federal investigation and ridicule. Thus the Higher Learning Commission responded by creating the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP), a modern form of accreditation designed to assist higher education with the quality assessment of programs and services to ensure student success. In seeking to understand the impact of AQIP on higher education accreditation, the researcher will explore the following questions:

- How do administration, faculty, and professional staff view AQIP as compared with previous traditional accreditation practices?
- How do the two views compare?
- Is the mission of the institution affirmed and advanced by AQIP's Quality Criteria?

- Is each AQIP activity clearly linked to teaching and learning and its impact realized?
- Is the district making use of external feedback that goes beyond the confines of its own experience and faculty?

Methodology: A qualitative research method, Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), was used to investigate the applicability and usefulness of a modern accreditation process. An IQA researcher's task is to understand what is happening with the participants through observation, conversation, and interview. The proposed study included three focus groups and interviews.

Findings: Three focus groups including administrators, faculty, and professional staff generated findings in regard to accreditation and AQIP. Most agreed AQIP is a process that is better suited to the culture of the institution but there was some disagreement on the level of involvement when compared to traditional regional accreditation. The impact of the first three-year cycle is difficult to determine, however, most agree there are residual impacts within the college including cross-district teams, the creation of common assessment procedures across the three colleges, and more faculty involvement in assessment.

Analysis and Recommendations: Both faculty and administrators agree that the mission of the institution drives the entire accreditation system at the college with the overall outcome being the impact of accreditation. There seems to be a weakness with participation and the researcher recommends an AQIP training program as a remedy.

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CHAPTER ONE -INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

OVERVIEW

Accreditation is the oldest and most common form of assessment in higher education. Over a century ago colleges and universities began to use accreditation to gain continuity in standards and practices exercised across the United States. “Accreditation is an American invention . . . it is a peer-review process carried out by volunteers and, at least is originally conceived, voluntary and non-governmental” (Glidden, 1998, p. 2).

This paper focuses on regional accreditation rather than specialized, programmatic accreditation. Specialized accreditors monitor and standardize professional degree programs by applying certain criteria to all programs and institutions (Glidden, 1996). On the other hand, regional accreditors evaluate institutions as a whole using both quantitative and qualitative standards tied to achievement of the mission of the institution (Baker, 2002). Regional accreditation does not monitor or accredit individual programs or subject content areas. Since its early beginnings regional accreditation has been the primary mechanism for quality assurance and self-improvement used by institutions of higher education.

History of Accreditation

In 1867, the U.S. Bureau of Education enacted the first form of higher education accreditation. The Bureau was charged with creating uniformity between states who had very different education standards and practices. Prior to 1867, each state had regulatory power over colleges and universities and this state control made the standard of education and the ability to grant degrees an arbitrary practice. Thus, the Bureau of Education set

out to standardize higher education across the country creating regional accreditors in the early 1900s.

The first regional accreditor, the North Central Association (NCA), began with a uniform set of entrance requirements that all schools in its region adhered to in order to be an accredited institution of higher education (Semrow, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992). Accreditors also created standards for admission, credit, transfer, and degree requirements. This system ran smoothly for the first two decades of the 1900s.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s tension erupted when colleges and universities began attacking accreditors for the increasing number of standards being imposed. Accreditors responded by developing committees to study and design a more streamlined accreditation process.

For example, the NCA created a Committee on the Revision of Standards in 1930. This committee realized that institutions of higher education were diverse entities and needed to be assessed as such. According to Semrow (1981) the new standards “took into account the growing differentiation among institutions in type and service performed and type of clientele served” (p. 387). Despite the changes to standards, accreditors continued to use criteria that measured institutions in quantitative terms such as the number of faculty or the square footage and number of classrooms. However, these quantitative measurements were combined with new criteria that allowed institutions to be evaluated in terms of their individual objectives.

The advent of World War II in the early 1940s signaled another transformational period for American colleges and universities. Accreditors began to help institutions of higher education plan for post-war training. According to Glidden (1996) accreditors

also worked with the federal government to determine eligibility for the General Infantry (GI) Bill funds.

Prior to World War II accreditation was a voluntary practice but it became tied to the disbursement of GI Bill funds. Again there was conflict as mandates decreased the power of institutions of higher education and increased the regulatory control of accreditors. Despite the friction, federal funds became very important to colleges who were willing to meet certain criteria in order to expand programs, increase enrollment, and perform research.

The expansion of federal funding in the 1950s and 1960s was termed the golden years of American higher education (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992). This time of abundance also led to the expansion of college infrastructure and degree programs across the country.

Also in the 1950s the NCA created a new committee, the National Commission on Accrediting. The committee brought about three major changes including adopting a self-study procedure in the accreditation process (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992). Institutions undergoing accreditation performed a self-assessment report. Next, the committee recommended dividing institutions by type such as universities or two and four year colleges. And finally the committee created a Leadership Training Program for college and university faculty and staff who evaluated colleges for accreditation. As a result of the training program, the first pool of examiners began performing site-visits in the 1950s at schools attempting accreditation or re-affirmation of accreditation.

During the 1970s, regional accreditors modified site-visits giving institutions information in the form of an exit interview before leaving the college. Institutions could

also appeal unfavorable decisions in writing or in person after a site-visit (Semrow, 1981).

While self-evaluation was introduced in the 1950s, not all institutions participating in accreditation opted to perform an internal study until the 1980s. During the 1980s all institutions of higher education undergoing accreditation were required to perform a “periodic self-evaluation seeking to identify what the institution does well, determining areas in which improvement is needed, and developing plans to address needed improvement” (Roueche, Johnson, and Roueche, 1997, p. 6). This decade also signaled another period of tension that lasted into the 1990s as state legislators became interested in the practices of regional accreditors (Ewell, 1993).

In the 1990s funding to colleges and universities was drastically cut because of the negative images of many institutions and regional accreditors. Thompson (1993) claimed, “Accreditation is no longer believed to be a guarantee of programmatic quality” (p. 40).

Education reform in the 1990s threatened federal and state funding for colleges and universities partly due to high student loan default rates. Congress responded by creating a series of regulatory agencies beginning with the State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPRE). The SPREs lasted a meager one-year with Congress eliminating their funding in 1993. Another regulatory agency, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was created in 1995 to act as an advocate nationally for voluntary regional accreditation and also act as a liaison between accrediting bodies, Congress, and the U.S. Department of Education.

Today mandates continue and so does the tension between higher education, the public, and regional accreditation agencies. Calls for quality in higher education are linked to accountability and integrity and will not go unanswered. Since the year 2000, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation has studied whether modern accreditation is holding institutions of higher education accountable, whether transfer policies should be strengthened, and whether distance education should be a separate standard (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2003).

States are also getting involved in regional accreditation by enacting legislation requiring quality assessments of all public agencies. This includes adopting some type of quality improvement approach based on criteria such as Malcolm Baldrige or ISO 9000. This trend towards studying quality has led to another experimental change in regional accreditation. In the year 2000, the NCA's Higher Learning Commission designed an alternative to traditional regional accreditation called the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP). AQIP is a modern form of accreditation designed to assist higher education with the quality assessment of programs and services to ensure student success. It also provides peer feedback and support regarding student performance while allowing institutions to study their unique aspects and achievements.

Because AQIP is only three years old, many member schools are now finishing their first three-year cycle and attempting to determine the effectiveness of the modern form of regional accreditation. There will be an abundance of data available giving researchers, legislators, schools, and the public the information needed to assess whether the process has alleviated many of the criticisms of traditional regional accreditation. A

more detailed description of the history of accreditation and AQIP are found in the literature review in Chapter 2.

The Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award

AQIP is an accreditation process that is grounded in total quality management and the National Baldrige Quality Award process. Sumberg (2000) claimed the application of Malcolm Baldrige process at each level (including accreditation) of the education system offers huge opportunities to meet student and stakeholder needs.

Established by law in 1987, the Malcolm Baldrige Award was created to “recognize U.S. organizations for quality achievement and promote quality awareness” (Diamondstone, 2000, p. 58). President Ronald Reagan named the award in honor of former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Malcolm Baldrige, who died in 1987 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2001). According to Przasnyski and Tai (1999) “Since its creation, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award has had significant influence on many U.S. organizations, particularly for companies embarking on or continuing with quality improvement efforts” (p. 1).

The Malcolm Baldrige Education criteria presented in Table 1 provides “a framework of values that can be addressed in any organization that is seeking to improve quality and service regardless of the quality method used” (Moore, 1996, p. 2). The criteria are general enough to be applicable to any type of organization whether large or small, public or private, non-profit or profit, manufacturing or service.

Table 1 - 2003 Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <u>Leadership</u>: Organizational leadership and social responsibility2. <u>Strategic Planning</u>: Strategy development and strategy deployment3. <u>Student, Stakeholder and Market Focus</u>: Student, stakeholder, and market knowledge; and student and stakeholder relationship and satisfaction |
|---|

4. Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management: Measurement and analysis of organization performance and information and knowledge management
5. Faculty and Staff Focus: Work systems; faculty and staff learning and motivation; and faculty and staff well-being and satisfaction
6. Process Management: Learning-centered processes and support processes
7. Organizational Performance Results: Student learning results; student and stakeholder focused results; budgetary, financial, and market results; faculty and staff results; organizational effectiveness results; and governance and social responsibility results

(National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2003)

In 1995 the National Institute of Standards and Technology conducted a pilot Baldrige program in education and health care with criteria built on the seven-category framework of the award's business criteria. The core value criteria were adapted to education and health care, with changes mainly in the verbiage of the criteria (Table 1). In order to design and implement this new category input was sought from a network of education and health care representatives from around the country. Sixty-five organizations submitted applications in the pilot program with 19 from education and 46 from health care (Diamondstone, 2000).

Research comparing the first education/health care pilot with business sector applications discovered higher scores in the ladder category. This did not stop the efforts of those working for the new category although it took almost five years for Congress to pass legislation extending eligibility to health care and education institutions. Ensby and Mahmoodi (1997) wrote despite cutting the pilot program after the first year, there was one important lasting effect, the development of the education criteria. With the passage of the bill on October 30, 1998, health care and education institutions were finally eligible to apply for a Malcolm Baldrige award. Despite taking several years to pass many U.S. organizations used the pilot criteria to move forward with their performance efforts.

The Malcolm Baldrige criteria gives educators a comprehensive, long term systemic reform effort. The Baldrige criteria alter the way educational institutions hold themselves accountable. “Instead of reinforcing negative outcomes such as the threat of exposure and blame for not measuring up, a Baldrige-based accountability model can help . . . reach consensus on education priorities, reinforce fact-based decision making, and identify ongoing opportunities for classrooms, schools, and districts to implement improvements” (Siegel, 2000, p.68). The Baldrige criteria are customer driven and like the service industry higher education is designed to meet the needs of students and stakeholders.

Baldrige at EICCD

At EICCD the Malcolm Baldrige process has been facilitated internally and externally to collect information and document organizational self-assessment for more than a decade. The college has used a Baldrige organizational self-assessment process to write an application to the Iowa Quality Center. The Iowa Quality Center provides organizational assessment feedback to public and private sector organizations across the state. The Iowa Quality Center uses a Baldrige assessment instrument and follows most of the same steps as the national quality award process.

EICCD uses the Iowa Quality Center to gather feedback from outside the institution for organizational improvement and they prioritize the opportunities for improvement that are provided in a feedback report. These opportunities for improvement can be addressed through documentation and data gathering by presenting historic information and comparative data. Currently the college is using the University of Wisconsin-Stout as their comparative. UW-Stout was the first institution of higher education to win a National Baldrige Quality Award in 1999.

In August 2003, EICCD submitted another quality application to the Iowa Quality Center. Feedback from that application will be used to determine action projects for the new AQIP cycle and will also be used to apply for a National Baldrige Quality Award in 2004. The National Baldrige Quality Award is more stringent than the state process but the steps are similar. In the state process there is an independent review by a team of examiners. After individual review, the team meets for a consensus review and possibly a site visit to the school or organization applying.

In the national process, there is an independent review and then a judge looks at each reviewer's feedback and decides whether the organization will receive a consensus review and a site visit.

EICCD's Director of Institutional Research is a National Baldrige Examiner meaning she can take part in a review process of other organizations. A reviewer from the educational sector is not required to only examine schools and colleges but may be called to evaluate health care, business, or industry applications. EICCD also has reviewers who are trained in the state quality process.

Baldrige and AQIP

Table 2 - AQIP Criteria

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <u>Helping Students Learn</u> – focuses on teaching and learning processes within a formal instructional context and addresses how the entire organization contributes to helping students learn and develop.2. <u>Accomplishing Other Distinctive Objectives</u> – addresses the processes that contribute to the achievement of an institution's major objectives that complement student learning and fulfill the college mission.3. <u>Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs</u> – Examines processes and systems related to student and other stakeholder needs.4. <u>Valuing People</u> – Explores an institution's commitment to the development of faculty, staff, and administrators for institutional success.5. <u>Leading and Communicating</u> – addresses how the college's leadership and communication structures, networks, and processes affect decision making, future opportunities, and building a learning environment. |
|--|

6. Supporting Institutional Operations – Includes processes that help to provide an environment in which learning can thrive.
 7. Measuring Effectiveness – examines how the institution collects, analyzes, and uses information to manage and drive performance improvement.
 8. Planning Continuous Improvement – examines the institution’s planning processes and how strategies and action plans help to achieve the mission and vision.
 9. Building Collaborative Relationships – examines the institution’s current and potential relationships and how they contribute to the accomplishment of the mission.
- (NCA, 2000)

There is a direct relationship between Malcolm Baldrige assessment and the AQIP activities at EICCD. They are both proactive rather than reactive forms of educational quality improvement. As indicated in Tables 1 & 2 the criteria are very similar, with AQIP’s Quality Criteria modeled after the 2003 Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence. The AQIP criterion “Understanding Students’ and Other Stakeholders’ Needs” shown in Table 2 corresponds with Baldrige’s “Student, Stakeholder, and Market Focus” criterion (Table 1). Also Baldrige’s “Faculty and Staff Focus” is similar to AQIP’s “Valuing People” criterion and both tables contain criteria dealing with measurement or collecting data to analyze organizational performance.

At EICCD there are currently four AQIP teams and three actions projects. The teams include Development Education, Student Transfer to 4-year Institutions, Student Transfer to Job/Career, and Electronic/Distance Learning. Each team collects data, benchmarks progress annually, creates data goals, submits reports to NCA, receives feedback from outside the organization, and focuses on student learning. For example, one of the action projects focuses on feedback received from the Iowa Quality Center about decreasing EICCD’s student loan default rates. A team was created to study the issue and implement a student loan default plan in the fall 2003 to reverse the trend.

When the North Central Association (NCA) began designing AQIP they consulted a diverse group of educators, business people, and quality assessors including many National Baldrige Quality Award examiners. NCA was visionary in determining the organizational assessment needs of educational institutions. They saw the need for an accreditation process that could be modeled after the Baldrige award, a highly regarded quality assessment process.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Accreditation is an evolving system of quality and assessment for higher education and has been the subject of federal investigation and ridicule. “Like American democracy, it is not a perfect system” (Glidden, 1998, p. 2). The stimuli for ridicule are legislative reports and articles describing a nation at risk and calling for “renewed integrity in the college curriculum” (Moore, 1986, p. 49). The U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness met in mid 2002 to address the role of accreditation in higher education. The Subcommittee reported the accreditation system is failing to ensure academic quality, it lacks accountability, and is driving up tuition and college costs (Morgan, 2002). The American Council of Trustees Alumni report Can College Accreditation Live Up to Its Promise? suggests the federal government no longer require a college to be accredited to receive financial aid because it is not working anyway. With each reauthorization of the Higher Education Act some members of Congress question the viability of accrediting agencies. Some of the changes being discussed include not tying the disbursement of federal funds with accreditation and giving the financial aid regulatory authority to states (Morgan, 2002).

The public criticizes higher education for not adequately preparing students while colleges and universities criticize regional accreditation claiming the political interests of accreditors result in standards that do little to measure student success. Some claimed

that regional accreditation is an exercise built on minimalist standards whose activities are hidden from public view; that it fails to prevent problems with both academic and administrative integrity; and it is an exercise in professional back scratching (Bogue, 1998). These criticisms create a vicious cycle of blame that must be broken or institutions of higher education will be faced with even more dramatic cuts in federal and state funding, which will ultimately affect teaching and learning.

The future of the United States educational system is on the line. Bok (1990) claimed “what we clearly have to do is turn adversity to advantage by using standards of public criticism to facilitate changes most of us agree are overdue anyway” (p. 19). If trust is lost in the educational system, society will be negatively impacted and the nation will lose its universal claim as home to one of the finest educational systems in the world.

SPECIFIC PROBLEM AREA

The Eastern Iowa Community College District (EICCD) is a large three-college system located in eastern Iowa. The district includes Clinton Community College, Muscatine Community College, and Scott Community College. Each of these colleges operates autonomously with their own presidents leading the three institutions and a chancellor overseeing all campuses, centers, and staff.

While the three colleges are autonomous, the entire district maintains a matrix organizational structure. Each of the three college presidents is also a vice-chancellor at the district level which is an interdisciplinary responsibility but a functional responsibility as a campus leader. This is a characteristic of the matrix structure where the design allows for sharing resources and placing specialists together. The matrix organizational structure also provides an “ability to facilitate coordination when the organization has

multiple complex and interdependent activities” (Robbins, 2000, p. 254). This structure works well for a large, complex organization like EICCD.

Many internal operations are centralized at the district level including community and economic development, business operations, technology and institutional support, personnel, public relations, resource development, and government relations. Activities like admissions, student services, and financial aid are decentralized at each campus. The three colleges also each have a library, bookstore, foundation, and athletic programs and academic programs vary at each campus.

Accreditation is also a centralized, district-wide activity with representatives from continuing education, the district, and staff and faculty from Scott, Clinton, and Muscatine Community Colleges serving on four Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) planning teams. According to Laurie Adolph, EICCD Director of Institutional Research, “we believe in cross functional and cross district teams to represent all stakeholders in the AQIP process and the master plan and we must have individuals who are interested in change” (Adolph, 2003). The four teams carry out AQIP activities that are coordinated with the institution’s strategic plan.

In 2003 the college will complete its first three-year AQIP cycle with the creation of a portfolio of projects that will be available on the Internet for public viewing. The district is also in the process of updating its master plan by defining seven new priorities based on information from each of the three colleges. This process involves many meetings and data processing but it is reported “when you get people engaged in the process [AQIP and strategic planning] they get interested in change and become empowered which is something that was not always there with traditional accreditation” (Adolph, 2003).

The specific problem area is related to traditional regional accreditation. In many colleges and universities around the country including EICCD, regional accreditation activities:

- Impose standards that had little or nothing to do with academic quality
- Rely on measures of institutional resources and quantitative standards
- Study the divisions of the college autonomously
- Refuse to acknowledge the unique nature of distance education programs
- Keep accreditation information from the public and other accreditors
- Rely on a one-size-fits-all process that is intrusive and costly and encourages slow cycles of improvement.

These problem areas prompted a call for change in regional accreditation processes.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Accreditation is the measure that many institutions use to assess the quality of their programs. If the public loses confidence in the quality of regional accreditation as well as higher education, the nation will suffer. Moore (1986) claimed there is a “perceived decline in the quality of American higher education . . . which has produced not only a generation of Americans whose educational skills are apparently inferior to those of their elders but also a loss of public confidence in the educational enterprise” (p. 50). Society needs a well-educated workforce if the United States is to continue as a leader in the development of business, research, and innovative technologies.

The problem of regional accreditation is that it is the only form of assessment available to colleges and universities. It includes some flawed procedures and a focus on compliance with standards rather than strategies to improve current systems. With

traditional assessment activities “no data concerning the actual impact or effectiveness of the education program is provided” (Astin, 1991, p. 36). Some of the other problems are described below:

- Once a college has received feedback from a regional accreditor what do they do with that information?
- Do they make changes in areas that need improvement?
- Do they maintain status quo in programs that were strengths rather than continuing to improve?
- What will become of accreditation if modern forms do not bring about changes at colleges?
- Are institutions of higher education destined to governmental control over assessment to ensure that there is improvement rather than maintaining business as usual?

These are the specific issues that surround traditional regional accreditation. The significance of these subjects is the reason that innovative accreditation programs such as AQIP were designed.

More and more people are attending colleges and universities in an effort to create a better way of life. Although great strides have been made in assessment, many regional accreditors continue to utilize standards that are rigid and do not embrace new technological advances in higher education. According to Astin (1991) “many of our most serious problems in higher education are, at root, problems with what we choose to assess (or not assess), how we choose to assess it, or what we decide to do with the

resulting information” (p. 231). These are concerns for the entire nation not just administrators of institutions of higher education and accreditors.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) A modern self-assessment accreditation process associated with the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and the Higher Learning Commission, designed to allow an institution of higher education to study the interrelated processes bound by the mission (NCA, 2003).

Accountability Demonstrating results in order to justify funding (Rogers, 1994).

Accreditation A nongovernmental, voluntary, and self-regulatory approach to assessment (Lenn, 1990, p. 1).

Annual Update An AQIP activity that includes submitting a report annually in September describing progress in quality activities (NCA, 2003).

Assessment A systematic inquiry into learning in order to improve it (Rogers, 1994).

Constructivism A paradigm of knowledge claiming what is real is a construction in the minds of individuals (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 83).

Institutional Effectiveness A comparison of results achieved to goals intended (Ewell, 1983, p. 89).

Interest Exploration An AQIP activity that includes examining institutional strengths and opportunities for improvement based on some standard such as AQIP, Malcolm Baldrige or some other quality criteria (NCA, 2003).

Re-Affirmation of Accreditation An AQIP activity that includes a simple certification procedure taking place every seven years, which may or may not include a formal visit from NCA (NCA, 2003).

Regional Accreditation A collegial process of institutional self-assessment and critical peer evaluation based upon criteria established by voluntary non-governmental associates (Baker, 2002).

Specialized Accreditation A form of assessment where individual programs are evaluated for compliance with quantitative program criteria usually independent of the institution's mission and goals (Baker, 2002).

Strategy Forum An AQIP activity that includes a discussion of action projects with other AQIP member institutions in order to solicit feedback from peers and NCA (NCA, 2003).

Systems Appraisal An AQIP activity that includes an appraisal of action projects by an appointed group of five peers who comment on progress by producing an appraisal feedback report (NCA, 2003).

Systems Portfolio An AQIP activity that includes a compilation of action projects created every three years and discussed with peers and NCA during a strategy forum (NCA, 2003).

Quality (in an institution) An institution that clearly states its mission (purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals that it has set for itself (Green, 1994).

Quality Improvement Providing a service that is designed to improve institutions and programs through an external review process (Glidden, 1998).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to engage administrators, faculty, and professional staff in focus groups and interviews in order to determine whether AQIP focuses more on quality as compared to traditional ten-year regional accreditation activities.

Another purpose is to use focus group and interview responses to create a group comparison of AQIP processes at EICCD. This will be accomplished by comparing group perceptions to determine whether information gleaned from AQIP activities is being used to make informed decisions on policy, programs, and personnel? Also the study will discover if the modern form of accreditation is embraced institution-wide.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do administration, faculty, and professional staff view AQIP as compared with previous traditional regional accreditation practices?

How do the three views compare?

Is the mission of the institution affirmed and advanced by AQIP's Quality Criteria?

Is each AQIP activity clearly linked to teaching and learning and its impact realized?

Is the district making use of external feedback that goes beyond the confines of its own experience and faculty?

ASSUMPTIONS

An assumption of this study is the dialogue produced during the focus groups will yield rich and truthful data about traditional and modern regional accreditation activities. It is also assumed that the participants involved in the focus groups and interviews will feel comfortable dialoging with other group members and the researcher. By separating administrators, faculty, and professional staff it is also assumed that each focus group will be comfortable providing truthful observations of accreditation practices at EICCD

without judgment from supervisors. Also the more homogeneous the focus group the more useful the information.

Participants must feel comfortable in order to describe their perception of reality in terms of accreditation at EICCD. It is important for the researcher to remember “realities are apprehensible in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111).

LIMITATIONS

The researcher will use credibility, transferability, and dependability, described in Chapter Three, to show that the qualitative research method used in this study is rigorous and credible. Despite those criteria there are limitations to the research. First, the researcher is biased in her ideas about accreditation, having been part of a traditional regional accreditation process at a community college. The process was filled with tension and a lack of understanding of the usefulness of information gathered. Despite this bias the researcher will remain open to all data provided in focus groups and interviews.

According to the constructivist paradigm, Guba and Lincoln (1989) assumed that the researcher could never be completely separated from the experiment and its participants when studying social constructions. “They [researchers] become simple messengers for the messages that nature chooses to send . . . an accountable partner in the evaluation process” (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 110). The researcher is further clarified as one who creates consensus or better-informed and sophisticated social structures. Due to the researchers involvement in the experiment it is possible that their bias may be changed through interaction with the participants.

Another limitation to this study is the random selection of focus groups without thought given to race, gender, or age. The only consideration for membership in the focus groups is status in the organization, administrator, faculty, and professional staff. Race, gender, and age will likely have an affect on outcomes provided but will not be considered when choosing focus group participants.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Regional accreditation in American higher education is a process that provides for the assessment of an institution's strengths and areas of improvement. It is a process that is criticized for its limitations yet remains the most comprehensive way to assess colleges and universities. AQIP is a modern form of accreditation designed in response to criticisms of traditional regional accreditation activities. This analysis is an attempt to determine the impact of EICCD's experience with AQIP.

CHAPTER TWO - A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is a review of research and written work on accreditation and higher education in America. A chronological history of accreditation will be provided along with a description of a modern form of accreditation created by the North Central Association's (NCA) Higher Learning Commission called the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP). AQIP is one of the most innovative modern accreditation activities in the United States. It is a rigorous process, yet shorter in duration and designed to be less invasive than traditional accreditation activities that take place every ten years.

Colleges and universities are under scrutiny because of the way institutions measure excellence. At the same time the public is calling for changes in accreditation procedures, which will positively affect higher education. Some contend, "accreditation has meant higher standards and greater progress for American higher education" (Glidden, 1996, p. 1). On the other hand critics of accrediting agencies believe they "are imposing standards on institutions that have little or nothing to do with academic quality" (Morgan, 2002, p. 1, quoting U.S. Representative Howard McKeon). This chapter addresses those issues and includes a description of the history of higher education accreditation, which began more than 100 years ago. The chapter will conclude with a description of modern accreditation and responses to recommendations for the future accreditation practices.

PATTERN OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is the oldest and most widely used seal of collegiate quality (Bogue, 1998). It is an individualized self-study process involving a non-governmental regional accrediting body and includes quality criteria that the institution agrees upon.

There are two types of accreditation in the United States, institutional and program accreditation. A regional accreditation commission, whose task is to evaluate the entire institution, performs institutional accreditation. The emphasis of institutional evaluation is on the achievement of mission and goals (Baker, 2002). Program or specialized accreditation is the assessment of a program that prepares students for a profession and is closely tied to a professional association (Lenn, 1990). Specialized accreditation includes the evaluation of a program using quantitative standards compared to institutional accreditation using qualitative standards (Baker, 2002).

An institution undergoing traditional institutional accreditation will be involved in the following pattern of activities that usually take place every ten years:

1. A rigorous self-study by the institution, examining objectives, activities, and achievements based on common accrediting standards
2. An on-site visit by a team of peers which provides expert criticism and offers suggestions for improvement
3. A subsequent review and decision by a central accreditation governing board to grant, extend, or deny status (Lenn, 1990, p. 2).

These activities are the analogous across the six regional accrediting bodies. What is different is the content of each accrediting agency's standards. Another distinction in each institution's accreditation process is the mission-driven purpose that defines quality at each institution. Baker (2002) explained "Institutional evaluation . . .

proceeds from the institution's own definition of its mission and goals" (p. 4). Overall accreditation activities are similar, but each institution's indicators of quality provide variation in the process.

An institution awarded accreditation is praised with confidence by the education community and the public and found to have:

1. Defined educational objectives clearly
2. Defined conditions under which institutional objectives can be achieved
3. Accomplished its objectives
4. Assured to have the necessary staff and support to continue to accomplish objectives (Commission on Colleges and Universities, 1999).

Accreditation activities are important to quality in American higher education. Although the activities are evolving the goal to create some standard measure of quality, has remained the same since accreditation began over a century ago.

HISTORY OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation Takes Form: 1860s-1910

Higher education accreditation began in 1867 with the establishment of the U.S. Bureau of Education (Semrow, 1981). Each state had radically different education standards and practices and the Bureau of Education was charged with summarizing those activities.

Unlike other countries, the United States Constitution "reserved for the state and local governments the primary responsibility for education, including higher education" (Lenn, 1990, p. 1). States assumed minor regulatory power over institutions of higher education and gave them latitude to carry out their activities. As a result "legal authority

to grant degrees offered little if any assurance that the institution was a good institution, or even that it was reputable” (Semrow, 1981, p. 384). These shortfalls brought about the need for early accreditation.

“By the first decades of the twentieth century the educational reforms created in the 1880s and 1890s had transformed themselves into certifying and accrediting agencies” (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992, p. 9). Created in 1901, the North Central Association was the first regional accreditor to generate a uniform set of entrance requirements for institutions of higher education (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992). Other regional accreditors followed the trend to create standards pertaining to entrance requirements including the Northwest Association in 1918, the Southern Association in 1920, and the Middle States Association in 1921 (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992).

Institutions relied on early accreditors to define minimum admission standards, assure that credits would transfer between institutions, and create other standards (Glidden, 1996). Some of these first standards are still relevant today, for example ‘preparing students to enter advance degrees.’ Before this time, accreditation standards had less to do with effectiveness criteria and more to do with the consistent activities of evaluators and the colleges studied.

Revision of Standards: 1920s – 1930s

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, accrediting agencies were increasingly attacked for the type and number of standards being used. For example one criterion insisted that classes with more than 30 students were endangering the quality of education (Semrow, 1981). In response to these criticisms the NCA created a Committee on the Revision of

Standards in 1930, to develop a clearer accreditation process (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992).

This reexamination of standards and practices was the first of many changes in structure and criteria for NCA. During this time period it is reported that higher education assessment was in a state of flux. “On the one hand, any criteria developed for identifying [the] quality of educational experience need to be specific enough to respond to the critical elements of quality . . . on the other hand, highly specific standards became mechanical and limit creative approaches to maintaining and improving the educational experience” (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992, p. 16). Accreditors were not sure how to respond to the changes and calls for more relaxed standards.

The response to the Committee on the Revision of Standards study was an acknowledgement that institutions of higher education are diverse and have different purposes. The new criteria “took into account the growing differentiation among institutions in type and service performed and type of clientele served” (Semrow, 1981, p. 387). Along with an admonition of the uniqueness of institutions of higher education, NCA also began to replace the term standards with the word criteria.

Unfortunately the change in verbiage did not completely transform accreditation activities. Semrow (1981) wrote “the criteria on finance and faculty and library-those that could be stated in quantitative terms-were applied somewhat arbitrarily and therefore came to look quite a bit like the standards they had replaced” (pp. 387-388). Whatever problems the new standards had were overshadowed by the meticulous attempts of NCA to “face directly the problem of identifying the characteristics of quality in higher education” (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992, p.

17). The new criteria called for institutions to be evaluated in terms of their own objectives, which is an idea that remains in modern accreditation.

A Transformational Period: The 1940s

In 1941 the United States became involved in World War II and the atmosphere at colleges changed. Colleges became training sites for the armed forces and accreditation followed the transformation by planning for post-war activities (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992).

After World War II, when the General Infantry (GI) Bill was enacted, institutions of higher education looked to accrediting bodies to determine eligibility for federal funding (Glidden, 1996). Until that time accreditation was voluntary but as federal funds became tied to regional accreditation, so the process of institutional examination became mandatory. As a result of the mandates, tension erupted among colleges and accreditors (Glidden, 1996). This friction continues today as many colleges blame accrediting bodies for adopting “a political agenda and . . . [using] their influence to require colleges and universities to adhere to it” (Morgan, 2002, p. 2).

The Golden Years of Higher Education: 1950s-1960s

During the 1950s and 1960s federal funds provided for many new programs in colleges across the country. This 20-year time period is referred to as the golden years of American higher education (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992). In higher education federal funds for research swelled, enrollments increased, and physical plants expanded across the country. Another change during this time was the creation of many Masters and Doctorate degree programs.

In 1954 the National Commission on Accrediting created a committee to look at revising its *Manual of Accrediting*. Three major changes to accreditation resulted from

the study (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992). First the committee proposed adopting the concept of self-study to involve institutions in their own growth through accreditation. Next the Committee recommended dividing the NCA service area into five growth districts by type: complex universities, simply organized universities, state and teachers' colleges, liberal arts colleges, and junior colleges. These committees provided regular contact with institutions that were accredited members or applying to be accredited. The committee structure remained in effect until 1970 when review committees replaced the committees by type.

The third and final change advocated by the committee was to create a Leadership Training Program to “develop more competent institutional evaluators and provide a series of institution evaluation experiences calculated to enhance leadership skills among selected college faculty and junior administrators” (Semrow, Barney, Fredericks, Fredericks, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992, p. 24). The Leadership Training Program was the first attempt by accreditors to create a pool of well-trained examiners for site-visits.

Also during this time period the Commission adopted a plan to revisit colleges every ten years. With an extensive, well-trained group of evaluators it became easier to schedule site-visits. Also the changing landscape of colleges and universities in the 1960s prompted the need for internal critical review.

Evolution of the Site-Visit: The 1970s

In the late 1970s a NCA commission was charged with updating the accrediting criteria as well as revising procedures followed by site-visit teams. Changes during this decade include on-site teams sharing accreditation recommendations with the institution prior to leaving campus, during the exit interview; giving the institution an opportunity to respond in writing to the review process; and providing an appeal process for institutions who feel they have been treated unfairly (Semrow, 1981).

Education Reform: The 1980s

Accreditation underwent another adaptation during the 1980s. In 1982 the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, an agency that coordinated accreditation activities, required institutions of higher education to perform a “periodic self-evaluation seeking to identify what the institution does well, determining areas in which improvement is needed, and developing plans to address needed improvements” (Roueche, Johnson, and Roueche, 1997, p. 6). This was the first time self-evaluation was considered a requirement for re-affirmation.

In the mid 1980s state legislators became heavily involved in education reform, including accreditation (Ewell, 1993). According to McCullough Moore (1986) “Amidst great controversy, legislative bodies . . . appointed select committees, commissioned reports, and acted decisively on reforms in educational finance, access, curriculum, faculty qualifications, admission and graduation requirements, and a variety of related areas” (p. 51). Each of these measures was tied to the quality of the institution and a call to be more accountable. Also during this decade, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) eliminated the word “must” from its standards and other accrediting agencies followed by relaxing the verbiage in their accreditation regulations in an effort to stay out of federal scrutiny (Glidden, 1992).

Continued Scrutiny of Accreditation Activities: The 1990s

Attempts at anonymity by accrediting bodies were unsuccessful and accreditation became a hotly debated topic during the 1992 federal reauthorization process. During the 1990s the image of colleges and universities was leading to reductions in student enrollment (Jaschik, 1991). Also during this decade there was a decline in federal and state funding for higher education (Gold, 1995). According to Glidden (1992) “Congress had little confidence in accreditation’s ability to handle fraud and deal with growing

student loan default rates” (p. 2). The result was a series of experimental regulatory agencies authorized by Congress that ended with little effect.

One such experimental group of agencies, the State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPRE), authorized in each state by Congress in 1992 to review colleges with high student loan default rates (Glidden, 1992). SPREs were essentially regulatory agencies but sometimes their actions were viewed as adversarial to the colleges and universities they investigated (Benjamin, 1994). In the 1993 federal legislative session, no funding was provided to continue the SPREs, although they remained in the federal Higher Education Act of 1992.

Then in 1995 the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was formed to oversee regional accrediting agencies. This council has proven successful as an advocate for institutions of higher education. CHEA is the primary national voice for voluntary accreditation and quality assurance to Congress and the U.S. Department of Education (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2003). CHEA also provides leadership to formulate issues related to quality assurance and to advance change and needed improvement in quality assurance in higher education (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2003). Finally an organization was created that seemed to have the best interests of both institutions of higher education and regional accreditation agencies.

As a result of changes in the early and mid 1990s “the language used in [accreditation] documents [was] revised . . . and those currently undergoing revision tend to be less prescriptive” (Gratch-Lindauer, 2002, p. 15). In October 1998 a law was ratified amending the Higher Education Act. Named HEA 98, the new law brought about the following changes:

- Modified standards required for accreditation, easing the burden on institutions and accreditors
- Implemented a 12-month timeline for agencies to rectify noncompliance with U.S. Department of Education criteria
- Combined distance education with the overall criteria rather than a separate standard
- Dropped any mention of SPREs, created in the 1992 HEA
- Dropped the statutory requirement for unannounced site visits to vocational institutions (Eaton, 1999).

There were other important federal changes due to HEA 98. First the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education suggested simplifying accreditation procedures, performing site-visits instead of requiring reports, and reducing materials required for re-affirmation of accreditation (Eaton, 1999). There was also coordination with the CHEA who began working with institutions and accreditors to implement the changes throughout the nation.

Finally in the late 1990s, “More and more accreditors . . . adopted a philosophy of reducing their reliance on resource measures and quantitative standards to the extent possible and striving instead to determine whether students are being prepared adequately” (Glidden, 1998, p. 5). The North Central Association was the last of the six regional accreditors to revise its standards to include institutional effectiveness measures for a more outcomes oriented accreditation process (Hudgins, 1993). This focus on outcomes continues today in accreditation procedures.

Modern Accreditation: The 2000s

In the 21st century, there is a new set of emerging federal issues. They include determining whether accreditation is holding institutions accountable for performance; determining if there should be a separate accreditation standard for distance learning; describing how accreditation can strengthen transfer policies; and finally determining changes that should be made to strengthen federal recognition (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2003).

Also in the decade of 2000 many states renewed their interest in accreditation practices. Hudgins (1993) wrote, “Because higher education in large measure has elected not to be accountable, legislatures in most states have initiated accountability measures” (p. 42). Each state created its own legislation on assessment, which made the pattern for regional accreditors more similar than the pattern that states use in quality activities (Wolff, 1992). For example, in 2000, the Governor of Iowa mandated that all state agencies adopt a quality improvement approach that must be updated and reported annually based on quality criteria. This regulation looks very different from regional accreditation activities that are reported every ten years.

The Iowa Department of Education was one of the first Iowa agencies to adopt the quality improvement model to both its internal systems as well as its accreditation processes. Some agencies were slow to respond to the initiative but several of the state’s leading colleges and universities understood the benefit of using a quality approach to study effectiveness.

Through the years, accreditation has changed due to the public, regional accreditation agencies, and institutions of higher education. Some accreditors are beginning to provide alternatives to traditional accreditation activities but many continue to operate as they have in the past. If accreditation is to continue to be the seal of quality

for higher education, it too must evolve as institutions change in response to student needs.

A CALL FOR CHANGE

Some colleges and universities believe academia is insulated from regulation, however; calls for reform in the last decade have quickly brought about changes in higher education accreditation. Roueche, Johnson, and Roueche (1997) wrote “there is strong evidence today that the remarkably persistent calls for accountability are not going away; rather they only grow louder as accrediting agencies, taxpayers, students, legislators, and other entities call for institutions of higher education to account for themselves” (p.4).

Several trends have brought about a need for change in higher education. First teaching has dramatically changed in the last decade. This affects classrooms as well as the college organization. According to Ewell (1998) there is a “paradigm shift from teaching to learning” (p. 3). This will affect accreditation by making outcome measurement even more important in accreditation processes. What is unfortunate is some “faculty have not been willing to take time from teaching or learning to do assessment, or to use its results to modify their method” (Rogers, 1994, p. 5). Effective teachers prefer intuitive judgments to statistical ones found in accountability criteria. Including faculty in the assessment process is necessary to bring about the shift from teaching to learning.

A second trend is accreditors will begin to study how the parts of the college fit together, rather than the current practice of studying the quality of college programs independent of each other (Ewell, 1998). This systemic view of the institution includes a self-study and site-visit describing how the college is coordinating its programs and services cross-curricular to enhance student success.

A third trend is the deinstitutionalizing of teaching and learning. Distance education has enhanced this trend because many students no longer attend one institution but take classes across the country over the Internet. In terms of accreditation it is important to encourage greater cooperation among accrediting agencies because several accreditors may have an interest in one institution. For example the University of Phoenix operates in many states and must contend with accrediting bodies that have different criteria for effectiveness. It is difficult for the national university to be consistent in services when trying to meet such a wide variation of standards.

Finally, there is pressure to include the public in higher education assessment. This trend is a response to the perceived lack of accountability in higher education. A problem with the inclusion of the public in accreditation is that different stakeholders have different ideas of quality (Ewell, 1998). Providing community members or students with site-visit panel training is one way to create a unified definition of institutional quality. Despite the criticisms of including the public in higher education assessment activities many countries in Europe report success when they include students and business sector representatives on accreditation site-visit panels.

This section provided calls for changes in the higher education evaluation process to make it more effective and responsive to student and the public. In response to critics challenging current accreditation practices the Higher Learning Commission created the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP). AQIP incorporates activities that promote sharing information externally and creating systemic organizations internally.

ACADEMIC QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT (AQIP)

AQIP is a self-assessment process that evolved out of the North Central Association's (NCA) Higher Learning Commission in April 2000. The goal of the Higher Learning Commission was to design an innovative, more challenging alternative

to traditional accreditation, one that voluntarily engages institutions by increasing the tangible benefits it delivers them. The initial project was funded through a grant from Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew chose the Higher Learning Commission because of interest in alternatives to traditional accreditation.

The Higher Learning Commission designed AQIP to:

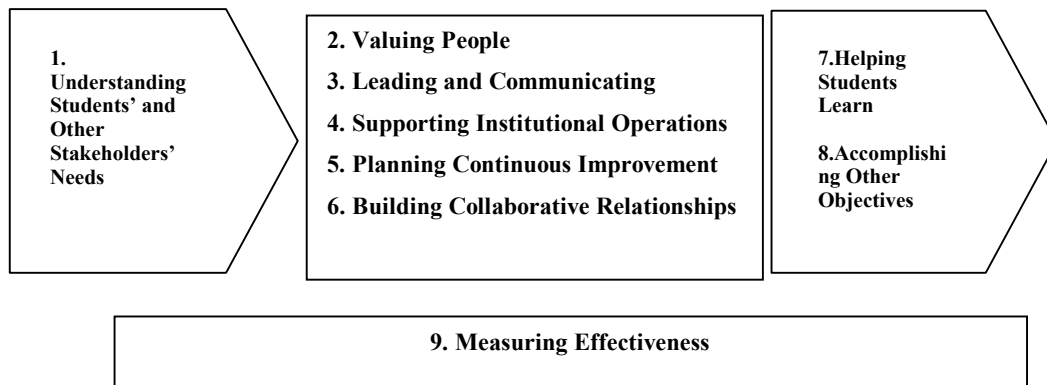
- Concentrate on the academic enterprise – particularly teaching and learning and involve faculty more directly in all academic improvement processes;
- Provide NCA member institutions with concrete feedback and practical support they can use to reach higher levels of performance and effectiveness in educating their students;
- Reduce, where possible, the intrusiveness, cost, and slow cycles of improvement associated with traditional accreditation, while replacing the current “one-size-fits-all” approach with one that can be tailored to respond to an institution’s distinctive needs and aspirations;
- Recognize and celebrate institutional distinctiveness and outstanding achievements, thereby improving the prestige associated with re-accreditation; and
- Supply the public with more understandable, useful information concerning the quality and value of accredited colleges and universities (NCA, 2003).

These claims are in direct response to criticisms of traditional accreditation. Because the process is new, many schools are only beginning to look at their first three-year cycle of data. The case study will look at Eastern Iowa Community College District’s experience with AQIP to determine the impact of the process on policy, programs, and personnel.

Like traditional accreditation, AQIP includes intensive self-assessment of strengths and improvement opportunities (weaknesses). The difference in the two forms

of assessment is that AQIP uses a particular set of criteria similar to Malcolm Baldrige standards (NCA, 2003). AQIP standards allow the institution to study the interrelated processes bound by the mission, using the criteria to uncover opportunities for growth and improvement (NCA, 2000). The following figure lists the nine AQIP Quality Criteria and how they relate to each other.

Figure 1 - AQIP Quality Criteria Framework



Source: NCA, 2000

Figure 1 indicates that quality is woven throughout the institution in a variety of criteria. On the left side, Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs, is the basis for accountability and drives all institutional activities through the preferences of internal and external stakeholders. Moving to the center square there are several criteria representing major systems that assist the institution in accomplishing student and stakeholder needs. Valuing People, Leading and Communicating, Supporting Institutional Operations, Planning Continuous Improvement, and Building Collaborative Relationships are activities that must be in place for the system to plan effectively.

On the right side of Figure 1 are Helping Students Learn and Accomplishing Other Objectives. Helping Students Learn is the primary goal of the institution and Accomplishing Other Objectives includes goals that may be distinctive to a particular institution (NCA, 2000). Both criteria are described as the reason for an institution's existence.

The final piece in the figure is Measuring Effectiveness. This task includes collecting, storing, retrieving, and interpreting data needed for continuous improvement of the whole system (NCA, 2000). Measurement takes place in the other eight criteria by recording student academic achievement, reporting who is involved in defining objectives, gathering and reporting satisfaction surveys, and creating governance and decision-making structures within the institution. Each of AQIP's nine Quality Criteria deals with activities and provides an institution with a framework for analyzing and improving processes.

AQIP criteria are considered revolutionary because "traditional organizational reviews often excel at fault-finding, at scapegoating individuals or divisions as targets for replacement, removal, or improvement" (NCA (b), 2002, p. 1). AQIP looks at the institution in a systemic way studying how the redesign of the system will lead to improved performance institution wide.

A participant institution must maintain its NCA accreditation by regularly providing AQIP with evidence of its academic improvement. Instead of going through the traditional NCA re-affirmation process, including a self-study and an evaluation site-visit every ten years, AQIP members annually file Action Projects that will be compiled into a Systems Portfolio every three years and reviewed in the fourth year with new strategies chosen. The timeline that follows represents an AQIP member institution's activities.

Table 3- AQIP PROCESS

Once	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perform an <i>Interest Exploration</i> and <i>Comprehensive Self-Assessment</i> both required initially to enter AQIP.
Annually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide an update or summary of quality progress due September on 21st each year.
Every 3 – 5 Years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A cyclical process consisting of a <i>Strategy Forum</i> and a <i>Systems Portfolio Appraisal</i>, which can involve an on-site evaluation.
Every 7 Years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal <i>Reaffirmation of Accreditation</i> will be a simple validation process, resting upon an institution's established pattern of continuing involvement in AQIP. • No special visit or report is required. • Prior to the formal <i>Reaffirmation of Accreditation</i>, an institution must have hosted at least one on-site evaluation visit in the last 7 years – the visit is usually part of the <i>Systems Portfolio Appraisal</i>.

Source: NCA, 2003

Institutions of higher education who are interested in increasing effectiveness for students and accomplishing other key purposes must complete a preliminary step before joining AQIP and completing the other activities.

Interest Exploration

An Interest Exploration is the preliminary step. It is a fact-finding process during which AQIP expects an institution to learn about quality principles and discuss whether a quality approach can be implemented at the institution (NCA (a), 2002). This self-assessment is a period of examining strengths and opportunities for improvement using AQIP, Malcolm Baldrige, or some other quality criteria. The Appendix provides a sample of one of AQIP's nine Quality Criteria. Self-assessment is an important preliminary step because it lays the foundation for institutional improvement.

The Interest Exploration will result in a feedback report from an independent consultant or a state quality program engaged in the process. Most states have quality centers working with business and industry, schools, government, nonprofit organizations, labor unions, and service and retail industries (NCA (a), 2002).

In Iowa, the Iowa Quality Center provides guidance and feedback to organizations undergoing quality assessment activities. The Iowa Quality Center has over 180 member organizations with 48,000 individual members and the center provides courses on ISO 9000, Malcolm Baldrige, and other quality activities (The Iowa Quality Center, 2003). As long as the quality-based assessment tool includes input from outside the institution it will be accepted by AQIP.

The quality report provides a baseline for improvement projects at the institution and will be a guide in the initial activity with AQIP. The report also provides data for the institution to identify potential Action Projects and to be involved in a Strategy Forum (described in the following sections). Action Projects drive both performance improvement and fundamental cultural change and growth (NCA, 2003). Each AQIP institution identifies three of four Action Projects that will drive its dedication to quality improvement through activities that lead to the improvement of the whole system.

Annual Update

Once an institution is accepted into AQIP it must complete an Annual Update in September each year. These reports indicate progress in quality activities including Action Projects described in the Interest Exploration section.

Strategy Forum

The next step in the process is the Strategy Forum. This activity will initially take place in an institution's first year of AQIP involvement. A Strategy Forum is a

discussion of action projects with other AQIP member institutions. This activity meets AQIP's goal to work with peers, giving an institution challenging but realistic ends for quality improvement using the AQIP Quality Criteria (NCA, 2003).

Strategy forums have several activities. First four or more institutions send teams consisting of the President, a board of trustee's member, a faculty member, and one or two other staff (NCA, 2003). This broad group ensures institutional support from a variety of sources. The group has already used the AQIP Quality Criteria to create measures and activities that will drive improvement through Action Plans. Next, each institutional group shares the results of their self-assessment and 2-3 year plans for quality improvement. And finally, the peer forum allows for constructive feedback.

The process is facilitated by AQIP and NCA staff that coordinates a discussion with the group and individually helps institutions create short-term goals for quality improvement. Strategy Forums also inform NCA of participating institutions' commitment to quality improvement.

Systems Portfolio

The next step in the AQIP process is the creation of a Systems Portfolio. All colleges or universities participating in AQIP will create and maintain a Systems Portfolio, or a concise description of the organization's fundamental systems for accomplishing goals (NCA, 2003). The Systems Portfolio "will paint an accurate, vivid, unifying portrait of . . . [the] institution's operations that will serve as a common ground for internal discussions of where and how to best direct efforts for improvement" (NCA (c), 2002, p. 1).

The Systems Portfolio consists of an institutional overview and follows the nine AQIP Criteria with descriptions of each system in the college. The descriptions include the following information:

- The context for the system under examination
- The key processes the organization uses to accomplish its goals
- The performance results the organization is obtaining
- How the organization uses its results data to identify targets for improvement to enhance the system and the organization's operations (NCA, 2003).

The Systems Portfolio is updated whenever changes occur and reviewed every four years by AQIP during Systems Appraisal. The review provides feedback highlighting the institution's commitment to continuous improvement and serves as a guide for continued development. AQIP assists institutions with the creation of their Systems Portfolio by coordinating a Systems Portfolio Dialogue. This is a forum where institutions share each other's strategies and techniques for improvement and provide feedback to one another.

Systems Appraisal

Every four years an AQIP member institution is required to undergo a Systems Appraisal. This is another opportunity for the institution to get third party feedback on its strengths and opportunities for improvement (NCA (c), 2002). This activity compliments work that went into studying the three or four Action Projects compiled in the Systems Portfolio, by looking at their affect on the overall system. Also at this phase new Action Projects are decided upon.

The Systems Appraisal begins with AQIP appointing an appraisal team of experts in quality improvement to evaluate an institution's Systems Portfolio and may include a site-visit. The appraisal involves five or more reviewers and has two parts, independent and consensus (NCA (c), 2002). The independent review includes each reviewer separately studying the Systems Portfolio and the consensus review includes a

cooperative team review of the Systems Portfolio. This process eliminates personal bias by creating a shared consensus of the Portfolio.

The team then produces an Appraisal Feedback Report for the institution. The report looks at the college in terms of the nine Quality Criteria and identifies strengths and opportunities for improvement within each system of the college (NCA (c), 2002). The team also provides a rubric describing the institution with regard to each of the nine Quality Criteria. The rubric allows for comparison with future evaluations. AQIP member institutions will use past rubric data to show progress in future evaluations.

Formal Reaffirmation of Accreditation

Reaffirmation of Accreditation, the next phase, consists of a simple certification procedure that takes place every seven years and indicates the institution's commitment to a quality improvement program. A formal visit is not required but the institution may request one. Because the AQIP process began in 2000, none of the charter member institutions have undergone the formal Reaffirmation of Accreditation.

The AQIP Reaffirmation of Accreditation process will differ from traditional accreditation in several ways. First, there should be substantially less paperwork (NCA (a), 2002). The Systems Portfolio is approximately 100 pages compared to the ten-year self-study in traditional accreditation with 200-500 pages. Second, the institution is constantly in contact with AQIP, updating reports and participating in Strategy Forums with peers. AQIP staff will visit when requested by the institution preventing the need to visit in the seventh year when Reaffirmation of Accreditation takes place. The reaffirmation site-visit in traditional accreditation can be disruptive to the institution, which is why it is eliminated in AQIP.

Finally, institutional change is tracked during the seven-year AQIP process. Institutions report major changes when they are taking place and request feedback from

AQIP personnel. AQIP examines these changes in whatever stage the institution is currently in, whether it is the Strategy Forum, Annual Updates, or Systems Appraisals (NCA (a), 2002). These activities make the AQIP process appealing to institutions that are focused on achieving ongoing quality improvement.

Reaffirmation of accreditation is not the final phase of the process because AQIP activities are cyclical. Once Reaffirmation of Accreditation has taken place the institution will continue with new Action Projects, a Systems Portfolio, and a Systems Appraisal.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OUTCOMES BASED ASSESSMENT

Several of AQIP's activities were designed in response to critics and the public's request for changes in higher education assessment. These calls are described as follows with responses indicating how AQIP processes are attempting to remedy past problems with accreditation.

“Today evaluation criteria are broad and vague, but include expectations that institutions demonstrate adequacy, appropriateness, and availability of resources to achieve outcomes” (Baker, 2002, p. 4).

In response to the previous statement, AQIP activities and standards allow institutions to focus on systems that need improvement through the use of Action Projects. However, AQIP criteria are broad and institutions and peers can judge the effectiveness of systems using baseline data described in an initial self-assessment. Each member institution uses relevant evaluation criteria to judge effectiveness and must show improvement from one three-year cycle to the next. Also AQIP includes a criterion, ‘planning continuous improvement’ that requires institutions to specifically describe the available budgetary resources needed to accomplish the institution's outcomes.

Today institutions are “expected to assess . . . [themselves] in a regular, systematic, and substantive manner, and thus, provide evidence of the achievement of intended outcomes” (Baker, 2002).

AQIP activities provide institutions with the skills to assess themselves on a regular basis through Action Projects, Annual Updates, and Systems Portfolios. These activities respond to criticisms of traditional ten-year assessment and site-visit activities by encouraging institutions to annually evaluate systems and compare results with past data to determine new initiatives. EICCD administration said, “We believe our NCA-AQIP teams provide the vehicle for empowering employee creation and ownership of solutions” (Adolph, 2003).

If the results of assessment are not used to make decisions at the institution, colleges “may find themselves in a position of being data-rich and information poor” (Baker, 2002, p. 5).

AQIP member institutions use Strategy Forums to make changes based on feedback from peers and AQIP and NCA staff. Also information in the Systems Portfolio is used as a baseline comparison for the next Strategy Forum to determine improvement and report to AQIP and NCA. Institutions must show improvement from one three-year cycle to the next in order to continue in AQIP. According to Hudgins (1993) “a basic element of an institutional effectiveness program is the establishment of indicators of effectiveness-data that document that the college has achieved its mission and goals and that there are identifiable key factors that must go right if the organization is to achieve its mission” (p. 43). AQIP has nine quality criteria that clearly describe indicators of effectiveness and how to document data obtained.

“Regional accreditation is adapting its evaluation criteria to justify the confidence of the public and the educational community that self-regulation is meaningful and effective in judging quality and effectiveness” (Baker, 2002, p. 6).

AQIP activities begin with a third-party, intensive self-assessment called an Interest Exploration. This phase is conducted by an entity outside the institution such as a private consultant or a state quality center. The consultant feedback provides an unbiased opinion of the quality of the institution and a baseline list of strengths and possible areas that need to be addressed. Also peers from the educational community evaluate an institution and provide unbiased feedback during Strategy Forum activities.

Critics contend that regional accreditation must make the following adjustments to their processes: change accrediting schedules; decrease the number of site-visit members; decrease information required; and share information in a common format with other accreditors (Glidden, 1998).

AQIP has responded to these requests to ease the tension between institutions and accreditation agencies. Activities that respond to this call are shorter self-study timeframes and smaller site-visit teams scheduled when the institution is ready for feedback, not at the end of AQIP’s seven-year cycle when reaffirmation is taking place.

Information is collected annually and reported to AQIP and NCA during Strategy Forums that take place every three years. AQIP member institutions are in constant contact with NCA and peers as they measure and assess the quality of the institution. Reports are also submitted electronically in a common format for sharing with other member institutions.

Accreditation must be more innovative. Current practices stifle innovation because the same standards are applied to all programs in all institutions (Gratch-Lindauer, 2002).

One example of an innovative AQIP practice is using portfolios that depict specific institutional projects related to quality improvement. AQIP uses System Portfolios that contain all of the Action Projects and are used to gather feedback from peers and AQIP personnel.

AQIP is also innovative because institutions use a variety of quality criteria to create their own Action Projects and implement steps to improve systems. On the other hand, traditional accreditation works within a specified set of criteria applied to all institutions.

The examples, described previously indicate that AQIP processes were designed in response to calls for changes in higher education accreditation. As AQIP revolutionizes assessment the process is also alleviating tension between institutions of higher education and regional accreditation organizations.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided a literature review describing the history of higher education accreditation in the United States. More than 100 years ago colleges and universities attempted to improve their practices by better defining admissions standards and coordinating transfer activities. As the evaluation system evolved, regional accreditors once again provided guidance in disbursing federal funds for GIs and helping to determine institutional strengths and weaknesses. The relationship has not always been good due to mandates and disagreements over standards but it has created a level of quality in higher education.

Modern accreditation practices such as AQIP, are responding to critics calls for more innovative practices, creating higher expectations, making available resources to achieve quality, regular assessment of outcomes, sharing of information, and ensuring to the public that the institution is focused on the student needs. AQIP's intensive self-

assessment process is tied to the mission of the institution in order to ensure that the college will promote growth and study areas for improvement in an effort to restore the public and legislative confidence in higher education.

CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design used to study perceptions of modern accreditation at Eastern Iowa Community College District (EICCD) and explain why the research method is suitable. In order to accomplish the purpose, a description of the sample and the procedures used for data collection will also be given.

The researcher will use a qualitative method to investigate the perceptions of faculty, professional staff, and administration at EICCD in regard to an accreditation process called the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP). By investigating the relationship between faculty, professional staff, and administration perceptions of AQIP, one may gain insight into the process' effect on college accreditation. According to Moore (2001), "the goal of qualitative research is to arrive at some general, overall appreciation of a phenomenon highlighting interesting aspects and perhaps generating specific hypothesis" (p. 1). Another positive feature of qualitative research is that it yields an abundance of information in contrast to quantitative research, which is narrow in focus. The researcher will use qualitative methods to form a hypothesis and advance understanding of AQIP and its applicability in higher education

The constructivist paradigm is most closely associated with qualitative research. The basic assumption of this paradigm is that "knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process" (Mertens, 1998, p. 11). The researcher will attempt to compare group perceptions to determine whether AQIP activities are being used to make informed decisions on policy, programs, and personnel at EICCD by monitoring those who have been involved in it. Constructivists interpret the meaning of something

from a certain standpoint or situation and the reality of the situation may change as the participants and the researcher become more informed (Schwandt, 1994 and Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

RESEARCH DESIGN – QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

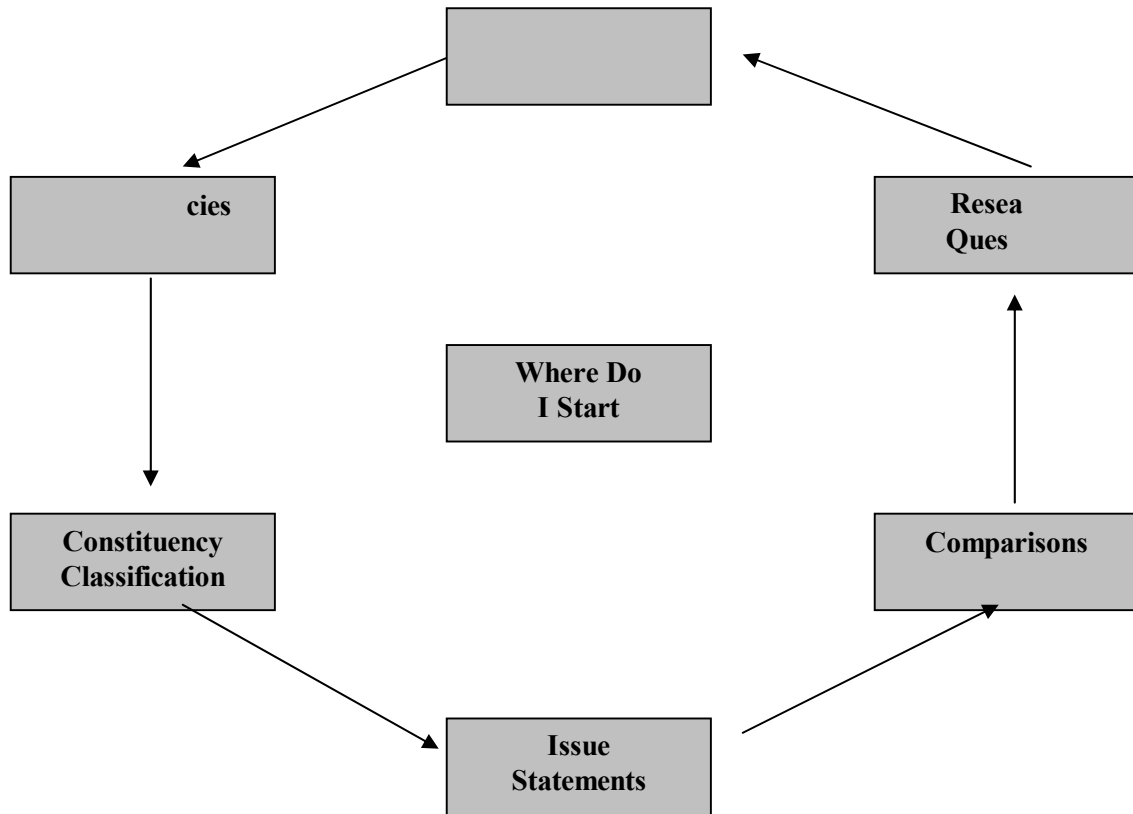
“Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them [using] . . . empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

A qualitative research method, Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), will be used to investigate the applicability and usefulness of a modern accreditation process. This method was developed by Dr. Norvell Northcutt at the University of Texas at Austin and is grounded in the constructivist paradigm discussed previously. The IQA method is used to capture meaning from the point of view of a person or group studied or interviewed (Northcutt, 2001).

An IQA researcher’s task is to understand what is happening with the participants through observation, conversation, and interview. The proposed study includes two focus groups and interviews. The researcher will collect data and continuously report findings to the participants. According to Mertens (1998) “in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument for data collection” (p. 175). The researcher uses IQA to draw a picture representing a system with respect to a phenomenon (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). In order to do this notes are gathered and compared to previous data. What sets this type of research apart from other methods is that it does not test a hypotheses but finds a theory that accounts for the research (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001).

Several design considerations must be decided upon before beginning the IQA process. Figure 2 indicates those important preliminary aspects and their relationship.

Figure 2 - IQA Research Design –A System with Recursion



Source: Northcutt and McCoy, 2001

The IQA Research Design, shown in Figure 2 above, has no beginning or end but is constantly moving in a circular pattern; however, for purposes of explanation the problem statement will be discussed first.

The problem statement is a high level argument broken down by research questions. In the proposed study of AQIP at EICCD, the initial problem statement is:

Traditional accreditation is an imperfect quality assessment process in higher education that is the subject of federal investigation.

Critics claim that colleges and universities are not adequately preparing students and regional accreditors promote standards that do little to measure student success or quality. Constituents and legislators are calling for reform in accreditation and those involved in AQIP claim that it is a response to problems with accreditation activities.

Moving to the left of Figure 2, constituencies are groups that have experienced and been part of EICCD's traditional 10-year accreditation process and have been involved in the new assessment process, AQIP. There will be three classifications of constituencies, faculty, professional staff, and administration. Constituency classification takes place when participants are listed by their distance from the phenomenon (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001).

Another way to classify constituencies is their distance from power structures at the college. For example administration is very close to the accreditation process and usually initiates it. Faculty and professional staff are also very involved in accreditation procedures but they are further removed and usually appointed or asked to sit on committees by administration. When creating focus groups it is important to group constituencies properly based on distance from these two segments.

Moving around the figure, issue statements are claims representing what the researcher wants to know from the constituency. During focus groups, participants are asked to think about a phenomenon in relation to a problem statement and dialogue about their perceptions. In the proposed case study, focus groups will be told the problem statement related to traditional accreditation and AQIP and asked to dialogue about their experience at EICCD.

Comparisons, the next box in the figure, are internal and external and they lead to research questions. The specific research questions in the proposed case study focus on comparisons of traditional accreditation and EICCD's fairly new AQIP activities. The comparisons include inquiry into whether the AQIP process is tied to the mission, if it impacts teaching and learning, and whether it provides useable feedback.

Due to the multiple realities of the constructivist paradigm, research questions cannot be established before the study but will change as the researcher gathers information about the phenomena and constituencies (Mertens, 1998). Research questions connect to the problem statement and the whole process begins again, with new information collected and compared to previous data.

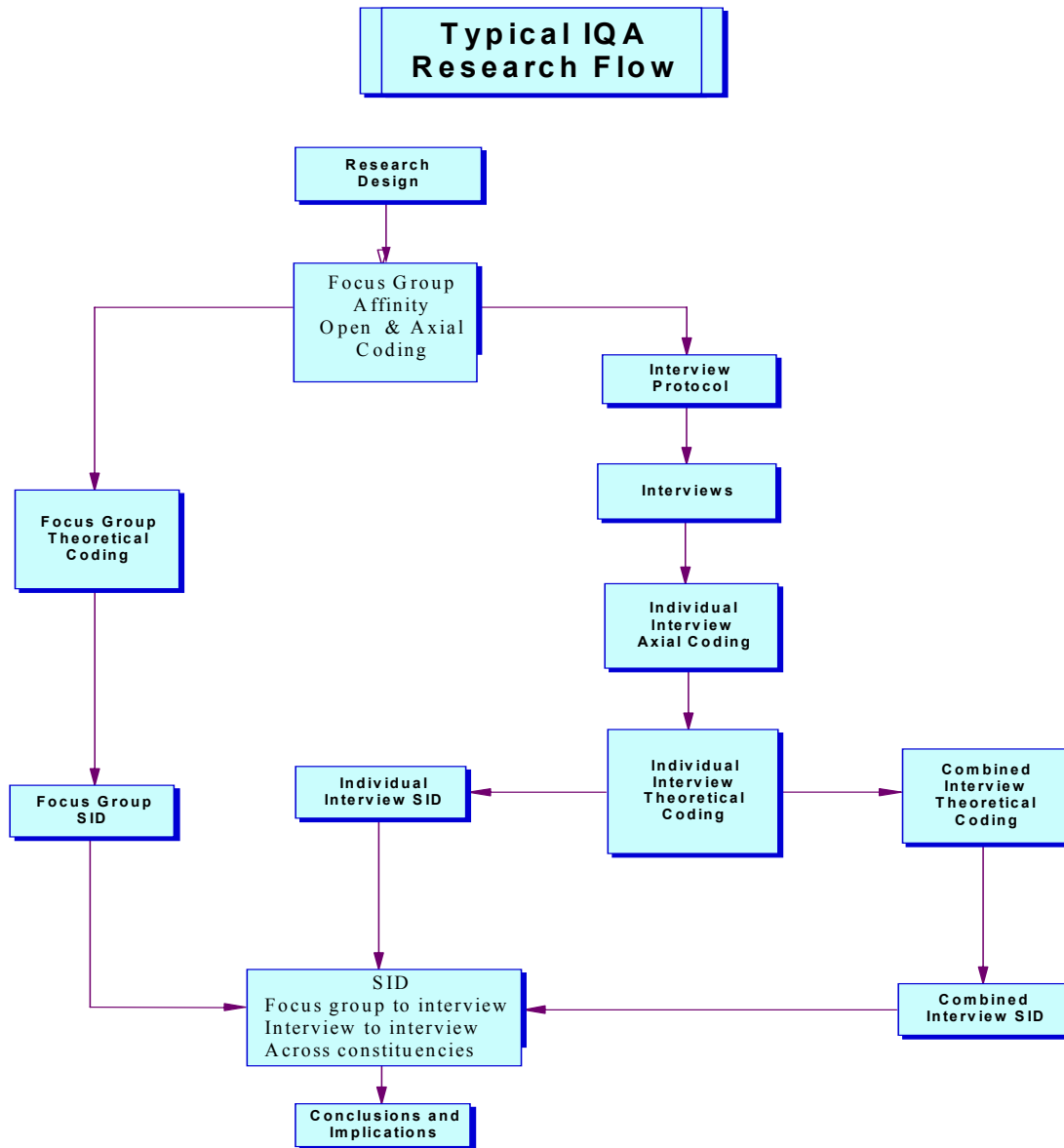
Observation is fallible and therefore reality is never completely certain. But through IQA's multiple measures and the use of triangulation across these multiple error-laden sources, it is possible to get a better indication of reality. IQA's multiple measures include focus groups, interviews, and member checks to ensure a consistency of evidence. Also having two different focus groups is another form of triangulation.

The cycle shown in Figure 2 is interactive and may be described as hermeneutical, or involving interpretation of meaning (Mertens, 1998). After the participant dialogue, the researcher is left with multiple perspectives that yield better results. Qualitative observations are theory-laden and the researcher may introduce bias into the experiment. But the IQA method prevents the introduction of researcher bias through affinities chosen by the focus groups, not the researcher. These affinities are used throughout the experiment, which limits the researcher's ability to bias the data.

PROCEDURES AND DATA COLLECTION

The following figure represents the IQA process. There are several steps that will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Figure 3 – Research Flow



Source: Northcutt, 2001

Focus Groups

IQA begins by assigning focus groups to discuss a problem or issue and creating affinities that describe the phenomenon. In the proposed study of accreditation, there are three focus groups, one with EICCD administrators, one with professional staff and the

other with EICCD faculty. The groups will be chosen randomly from a pool of applicants who meet three criteria:

- 1) They have been employed by the college for more than five years
- 2) They have been involved in a traditional ten-year accreditation process through the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools or some other national accrediting body
- 3) They are involved in the current AQIP process.

The focus groups will each have 10-15 participants with a mixture of genders, ages, and races. It is important to include systematic variation across the focus groups. Ways to introduce variation are to including diverse characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, or disability and to change the order of group discussion questions (Mertens, 1998, p. 174). According to Morgan (1988) only a few groups are needed when the research is structured and exploratory as with IQA.

IQA Process

The facilitator/researcher begins the IQA process by declaring the problem statement and asking the focus group to contemplate the issue for a moment. A group discussion ensues and this leads the researcher to tell a story that portrays the issue in a way that the focus group can relate to.

The researcher will begin by asking the focus group if AQIP is a more useful form of accreditation that has lead to institutional improvement at EICCD. The focus group is asked to participate in a silent nominal group technique of quietly brainstorming about the issue and then writing their thoughts on index cards, which are taped to the wall so that the group can discuss them. According to Northcutt and McCoy (2001) the silent nominal process “generates a large amount of data” (Chapter 3, p.6).

After the silent nominal process the participants tape the index cards to the wall so the entire focus group can read them. The facilitator goes through each card with the group to clarify the meaning of the word or phrase and eliminate vagueness. The purpose of this exercise is to arrive at a group consensus about each card (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001).

The next step involves coding each affinity into themes. The focus group is asked once again to silently study each card and arrange them into similar themes. The role of the facilitator at this point is to ensure that all members of the focus group reach consensus and are participating in the next step, which is axial coding.

Axial Coding

Axial coding is the group process of organizing and naming each affinity. When each category is coded it is possible to further sub-divide within the affinities to create sub-affinity categories. The result of this process is a new set of data, once again generated by the focus group. At this point the researcher will write a paragraph about each affinity using the index cards and themes decided upon by the focus group for paragraph content. Each description should include: detail, contrast (what the affinity is not), comparison (how it is different from the other affinities), and richness of examples (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). According to Northcutt and McCoy (2001), “it is important that each affinity is described clearly and directly, remaining faithful to the language used by the focus group members and following the sense of what participants were saying” (Chapter 3, p. 11). This step ensures that the focus group’s ideas are continued to the next stage in the process, theoretical coding, and prevents the introduction of researcher bias.

Theoretical Coding

The next step in the IQA process is theoretical coding. Again, the focus groups are lead in a discussion of theoretical coding which is the point where cause and effect relationships are named with respect to each affinity defined in the axial coding process (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001).

Table 4 – Affinity Relationship Table

Affinity Name	Possible Relationships
1. Application towards Dissertation	$A \rightarrow B$
2. Cognitive Reaction (Dialectic) / Comprehension	$A \leftarrow B$
3. Collaboration	$A \diamond B$ (No Relationship)
4. Communication	
5. Course Structure	

AFFINITY RELATIONSHIP TABLE		
AFFINITYPAIR RELATIONSHIP		IF/THEN STATEMENTS
1 \leftarrow 2		If there is cognitive reaction then there will be application towards dissertation
1 \rightarrow 3		If there is application towards dissertation then there will be collaboration
1 4		
1 5		
2 3		
2 4		
2 5		
3 4		
3 5		
4 5		

First each focus group participant answers each affinity pair relationship individually then creates an if/then statement about it as seen in the example from a previous study in Table 4. For example if 2 is present than 1 happens and the statement

that follows is “if there is cognitive reaction then there will be application towards dissertation.” Then the entire focus group votes on each of the affinity pair relationships. The researcher will begin by asking does affinity 1 affect 2, 2 affect 1, or is there no relationship. The researcher will record only one of the three possibilities for each affinity pair relationship.

Group consensus is key to good data and the Pareto Principle is a rule used to determine consensus. The Pareto Principle states that 20% of the variables in a system will account for 80% of the total variation in important outcomes (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). Using the Pareto Principle in the previous example each participant will be given one vote (five affinities x 20%) to distribute among the five affinities, with only one vote per affinity. In most cases when the votes are tallied the one with the most votes represents the groups consensus. Northcutt and McCoy (2001) explained “almost always a few (20%) of the candidates will attract most (80%) of the votes. Furthermore, these few candidates typically are hypotheses representing only one direction, which provides dramatically persuasive visual evidence of the directionality of the relationship” (Chapter 4, p. 11).

The Interrelationship Diagram (IRD)

This stage of the IQA process includes recording relationships into an Interrelationship Diagram (IRD) or table that represents all relationships among the affinities. A sample IRD is shown in Table 5. The Interview Affinity Relationship Table indicates the relationship between the five affinities chosen by the focus groups as described in the previous section. The arrows are assigned by consensus of the focus group. When an arrow points from one affinity it is the cause and the affinity it points to is the effect. According to Northcutt and McCoy (2001) “An IRD marks a significant distinction in IQA and other forms of qualitative research as it marks the relationships

between affinities and begins to point to cause-and-effect relationships” (Chapter 4, p. 13). The information about cause and effect relationships can be used to make improvements in the system.

Table 5 Affinity Relationship Table & Interrelationship Diagram (IRD)

Affinity Name	Possible Relationships
1. Application towards Dissertation	$A \rightarrow B$
2. Cognitive Reaction (Dialectic) / Comprehension	$A \leftarrow B$
3. Collaboration	$A \diamond B$ (No Relationship)
4. Communication	
5. Course Structure	

AFFINITY RELATIONSHIP TABLE				
AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP		AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP		AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP
1 \leftarrow 2		1 \rightarrow 5		2 \leftarrow 5
1 \rightarrow 3		2 \leftarrow 3		3 \leftarrow 4
1 \leftarrow 4		2 \leftarrow 4		3 \diamond 5

TABULAR IRD									
	1	2	3	4	5		OUT	IN	Δ
1		\leftarrow	\uparrow	\leftarrow	\uparrow		2	2	0
2	\uparrow		\leftarrow	\leftarrow	\leftarrow		1	3	-2
3	\leftarrow	\uparrow		\leftarrow	\diamond		1	2	-1
4	\uparrow	\uparrow	\uparrow		\uparrow		4	0	4
5	\leftarrow	\uparrow	\diamond	\leftarrow			2	1	1

Once the group has reported their information for the Affinity Relationship Table it is transferred to the Tabular IRD. This is done by placing arrows into the table showing

the direction of the relationship between two affinities. Each relationship is recorded twice, along the top and left sides of the diagram. In the Tabular IRD arrows point up or to the left. For example in Table 5, Affinity 2 is the cause and Affinity 1 is the effect because the arrow points up from the left column 2 to the top row 1 or to the left of row 1 from column 2. Once each relationship is recorded in the Tabular IRD the arrows must be counted for each row. Arrows pointing up (\uparrow) are called *Outs* and arrows pointing to the left (\leftarrow) are named *Ins*. In order to determine Delta (Δ) subtract the number of *Ins* from the *Outs* ($\Delta = \text{Out} - \text{In}$).

Table 6- Tabular IRD

TABULAR IRD SORTED IN DESCENDING ORDER OF Δ									
	1	2	3	4	5		OUT	IN	Δ
4	\uparrow	\uparrow	\uparrow		\uparrow		4	0	4
5	\leftarrow	\uparrow	\diamond	\leftarrow			2	1	1
1		\leftarrow	\uparrow	\leftarrow	\uparrow		2	2	0
3	\leftarrow	\uparrow		\leftarrow	\diamond		1	2	-1
2	\uparrow		\leftarrow	\leftarrow	\leftarrow		1	3	-2

When the delta for each row is determined the next step is to sort each affinity in descending order of delta (Table 6). This step allows the researcher to determine the drivers and outcomes.

Table 7 – SID Assignments

Tentative System Influence Diagram Assignments	
4	Primary Driver
5	Secondary Driver
1	Circulator / Pivot
3	Secondary Outcome
2	Primary Outcome

The drivers and outcomes are assigned so the researcher can identify placement of affinities for a visual representation of the system or phenomena being studied (Table 7).

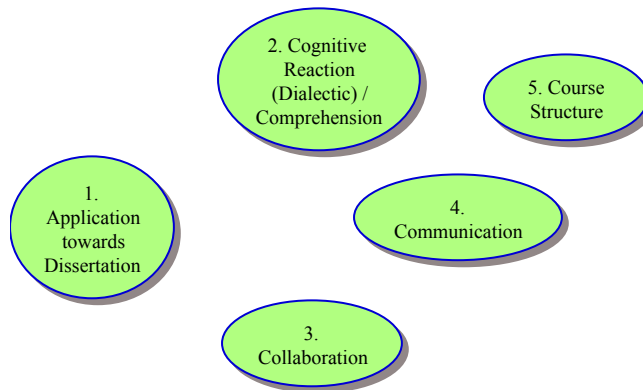
Northcutt and McCoy (2001) defined the drivers and outcomes as follows:

- *Primary Driver* has a high positive delta or many *outs* but no *ins* meaning that it is the cause to the effect of many other affinities but is not an effect of any affinities
- *Secondary Driver* is the cause of many affinities in the system and has more *outs* than *ins*
- *Circular/Pivot Point* happens when there are equal numbers of *outs* and *ins* or a delta of zero
- *Secondary Outcome* indicates an effect relationship, where there are more *ins* than *outs* for that affinity
- *Primary Outcome* has a high negative number indicating that there are many *ins* but not *outs*, meaning that it is an effect that is caused by many affinities

System Influence Diagram (SID)

The next step in the process is the creation of a System Influence Diagram (SID) of each focus group's IRD information. A SID is a visual representation of the system including the relationships shown in the IRD. The SID also depicts how the system is maintained and where it can be influenced to change outcomes (Northcutt and McCoy , 2001).

Figure 4 – Affinities



To begin drawing a SID create a box or circle for each affinity, in the example there were five (Figure 4). Next draw arrows from one circle to the next using the relationship information found in the Affinity Relationship Table. From Figure 6 the first two relationships are “1 ← 2” or 2 causes 1 and “1 → 3” or 1 causes 3. The visual representation of those two relationships is shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5 - Focus Group Affinity Relationships

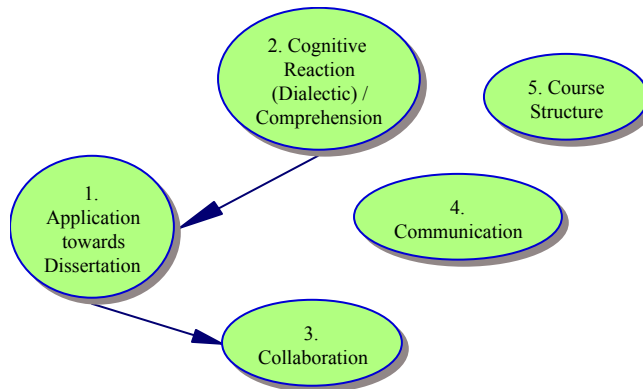
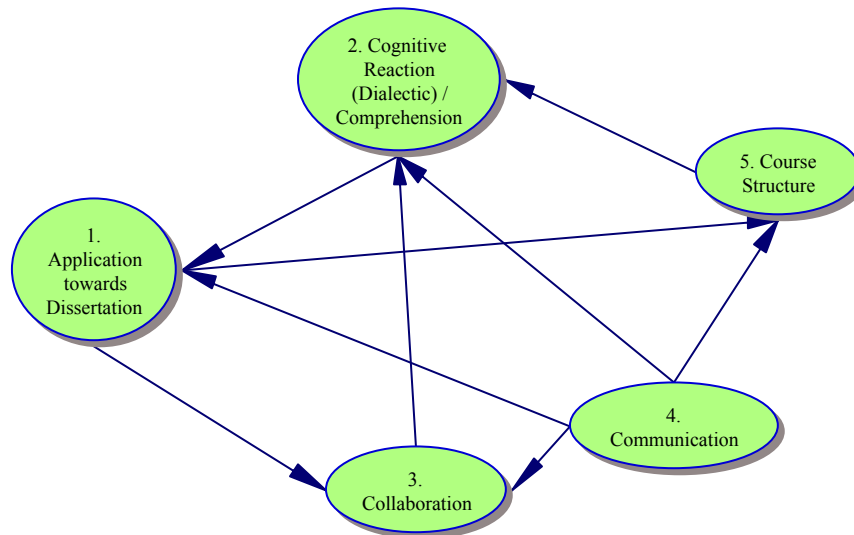
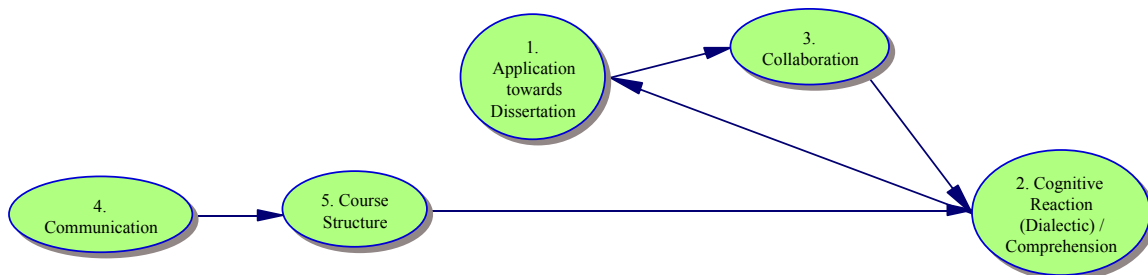


Figure 6 - Cluttered SID



All links between relationships are drawn and the result is a Cluttered SID that is difficult to interpret (Figure 6). It is possible to simplify the Cluttered SID by removing redundant links or more than one arrow indicating a relationship between two affinities. When redundancy is removed an Uncluttered SID is created that is easier to interpret (Figure 7).

Figure 7 - Uncluttered SID



The Uncluttered SID shown in Figure 7 has an interesting trait. There is a recursion or feedback loop between Affinities 1, 2, and 3. A feedback loop requires at least three affinities and has no beginning or end. It is the tendency of affinities that are relative outcomes or effects in a system to feed back or to influence elements that appear

earlier in the system (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). Within the loop previous affinities influence successive ones. It should also be noted that not all systems will have a feedback loop but when they occur it is necessary to reflect on what is happening within the recursion and interpret its effect on the entire system.

The Interview Phase

The interview phase of IQA is a critical step in the study. The goal of the interview is to discuss and define the meaning of the affinities for each person in the focus group. Table 8 indicates the steps in the Interview Phase.

Table 8 - The IQA Interview

1. (Axial) Give the respondent a list of names and descriptions of each affinity (the affinity write-ups from the initial focus groups) and introduce each affinity to the respondent, relying on the write-up of the affinity and any supporting materials or examples produced from the focus group.
2. (Axial) Ask the respondent to reflect on his or her personal experience vis-à-vis the affinity by asking a lead question in the form of “Tell me about your experience with this.”
3. (Axial) Ask follow-up questions and probe illicit examples of the affinity in the respondent’s experience to elucidate the meaning of the affinity to the respondent.
4. (Theoretical) After the respondent has covered all the affinities, conduct the second part of the interview, in which the respondent uses an Affinity Relationship Table to examine how he or she perceives the connections between all possible pairs of affinities (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001).

The axial interview stage allows the participants to provide rich descriptions of the affinities. The researcher asks each participant to “describe what affinity 1 means to you.” The first part of the interview is open and the participant merely dialogues about

each affinity as the researcher records the conversation and encourages the participant to elaborate ideas (Table 9).

Table 9 - Axial Interview Form

Affinity Name
1. Application Towards Dissertation
2. Comprehension
3. Collaboration
4. Communication
5. Course Structure

INTERVIEW AXIAL CODE TABLE		
AFFINITY	TRANSCRIPT LINE	AXIAL QUOTATION
1. Application Towards Dissertation		
2. Comprehension		
3. Collaboration		
4. Communication		
5. Course Structure		

The second part, the theoretical interview, is highly structured and includes a detailed look at the affinities in order to create a personal mind map (SID) for each participant in the focus group. In the theoretical interview phase the researcher will meet with each focus group member individually and give the respondent a copy of the Affinity Relationship Table shown in Table 10.

Table 10 - Theoretical Interview Forms

Affinity Name 1. Application Towards Dissertation 2. Comprehension 3. Collaboration 4. Communication 5. Course Structure	Possible Relationships $A \rightarrow B$ $A \leftarrow B$ $A \diamond B$ (No Relationship)
--	--

THEORETICAL CODE AFFINITY RELATIONSHIP TABLE		
AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP	LINE NUMBER	THEORETICAL QUOTATION
1 2		
1 3		
1 4		
1 5		
2 3		
2 4		
2 5		
3 4		
3 5		
4 5		

The researcher will introduce this section of the interview phase and ask the respondent to state whether 1, application towards dissertation affects 2, comprehension; 2 affects 1; or there is no relationship (completed for each pair of affinities). Then the researcher will qualify what the respondent said in order to dialogue about the relationship. This stage is also recorded to obtain a transcript of the respondent's explanations. After a transcript of the interview is created and respondent comments are added to the Affinity Relationship Table it is recommended that the researcher and respondent have a debriefing session to go over each affinity relationship. This also

gives the researcher more insight into the vocabulary and metaphors used by the respondent for further clarification of the system (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001).

After all members of the focus group have been interviewed and each filled out the axial and theoretical interview forms and an individual mind map (SID) has been created, a summary of the entire group is created. The combined SID will represent a composite of each member of the focus group and can be compared to the second focus group's composite. By combining interviews into one table, the researcher has a database for all respondents containing information for all affinities with links to the transcript line for further clarification of relationships (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). The process creates a rich source of information about the phenomenon that was described in the beginning with a problem statement and issues.

DATA ANALYSIS

IQA data analysis focuses on studying social systems that involve human interpretation. The elements of social systems are diverse and may include characteristics unique to an individual, organization, or interactions between social structures in an organization (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). The data represent cause and effect relationships among elements. IQA research is used to describe both the elements and the relationships of a social system in order to determine influence and patterns and intervene at various levels of the system. Data analysis is completed through tables in Microsoft Word and SIDs created using a mind mapping software program called Inspiration.

Credibility, Transferability, and Dependability

There are several criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research including credibility, transferability, and dependability. These criteria will be discussed in relation to IQA to determine its reliability as a qualitative method.

Credibility is aligned with post-positivist internal validity. According to Mertens (1998) a “credibility test asks if there is a correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints” (p. 181). As described in the previous section there is credibility in IQA research because the focus groups define affinities related to a problem and those affinities are used throughout the entire process.

The respondents create affinities based on their perceptions of a social phenomenon and the IQA process allows for checking and re-checking throughout the study. The affinities provide the basis for describing the system and are a discussion tool in the interview phase. Also, at the end of the interview phase there is a debriefing session, also a form of credibility. Respondents are given a chance to clarify their decisions and make changes if necessary.

Another important aspect of credibility is member checks (Mertens, 1998). In IQA member checks are used throughout the research process. In the first phase the focus group is given time to discuss affinities and group them and change their mind. Later in the process, each focus group is shown a group SID and given an opportunity to describe the affinity relationships in their own words and clarify or change the diagram. Also transcripts of interviews are shared with each respondent to solicit feedback and make changes.

Triangulation, another form of credibility, is also used throughout the IQA process. Interviews, observation, and document review with focus groups are all aspects

of triangulation used in IQA. Three different focus groups are used in the proposed accreditation study at EICCD, adding to the richness of the data. These groups have different ideas about the problem statement and issues, which will be reflected in the data produced during the study.

Transferability is another criterion for judging the quality of qualitative research. Guba and Lincoln (1989) define transferability as a parallel to external validity in postpositivist research. Mertens (1989) further clarified transferability as “the degree to which you can generalize the results to other situations” (p.183). In case study research Yin (1994) reported that multiple cases strengthen external validity.

Transferability is evident in IQA research through the use of more than one focus group. Each focus group member provides their interpretation (multiple viewpoints) of a problem or situation in regard to accreditation and AQIP. These multiple viewpoints are compared to composites of the entire group to determine if they correspond. Then each composite focus group is compared to note similarities or differences in the focus groups. The SIDs that will result from the proposed IQA study will provide a visual diagram of the accreditation system at EICCD and highlight where intervention is needed.

Dependability is yet another criterion for judging the quality of qualitative research. Mertens (1998) described dependability as synonymous with reliability. In qualitative terms, change is expected and to be reliable it should be tracked and reported to the constituency (Mertens, 1998). IQA includes steps for review of findings from the first phase of the project to the final interview phase. Focus group members are given opportunities to change their ideas in the early stages of IQA when discussing the affinities. Then they decide cause and effect relationships as a group and have an opportunity to individually report affinity relationships. One of the IQA researcher’s

important roles is to keep the respondents (constituency) informed of the results adding to the dependability of the data.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter served as an introduction and guide to Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), a qualitative method used to study AQIP, a modern form of accreditation. The IQA method is suitable for this type of study because it helps the researcher accomplish the task of understanding what is happening at EICCD through observation, conversation, and interview.

The goal of this chapter was to describe IQA and also discuss its suitability. First a description of the phases of IQA was given including the focus group activities and individual respondent interviews. Figures described the processes and forms used by the researcher and visual representations of data were provided in the form of System Influence Diagrams (SID).

The final section of this chapter provided three criteria for judging the quality of IQA research including credibility, transferability, and dependability. IQA incorporates the use of multiple measures, member checks, and dialogue between the researcher and the participants to ensure that data is rich and meaningful. IQA is not a hands-off experiment where the researcher and researched never interact but is an analysis with people actively involved in the process making it more realistic and useful when studying social situations.

CHAPTER FOUR - DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter includes an analysis of the focus group and interview findings. Research was conducted to investigate perceptions of the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) in order to determine whether AQIP is a more positive form of accreditation. Three focus groups were held to gain an understanding of AQIP practices at Eastern Iowa Community College District (EICCD) and compare AQIP to traditional regional accreditation. The focus groups were used to develop a reconciled protocol for separate individual interviews of faculty and administration. The reconciled protocol incorporates the commonalities between the focus groups while maintaining the integrity of each of the original systems (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). The administration and professional staff focus groups yielded similar information therefore the researcher decided to use only administration and faculty for individual interviews.

A focus group of 10 faculty who are currently involved in AQIP activities at EICCD composed the first group. A focus group of 12 professional staff composed the second group. These professional staff were also involved in AQIP activities and had also experienced a traditional regional accreditation process. A focus group of 10 administrators, who had experience with both AQIP and regional accreditation, comprised the third group. The focus groups were made as homogeneous as possible, with certain limitations addressed in this study.

RESEARCH QUESTION #1 – HOW DO ADMINISTRATION, FACULTY, AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF VIEW AQIP AS COMPARED WITH PREVIOUS TRADITIONAL REGIONAL ACCREDITATION?

Part A – Administration

The focus group made up of EICCD administrators was read an issue statement describing accreditation as an evolving system which has been criticized in the past. This statement was followed by information about AQIP and its implementation at EICCD. The focus group then developed more than 50 responses on index cards comprising of phrases or one word that describes their thoughts on the issue. The cards were sorted by the focus group members according to themes that arose. The themes, called affinities, were then named by the focus group based on an identifying characteristic. The following list is the six affinities that emerged from the focus group made up of administrators with descriptions that resulted from the group discussion.

- Institutional Process
- Data
- Time
- Impact
- Mission
- Teaching and Learning

Institutional Process

According to the administrators who participated in the focus group, AQIP confirms the college's commitment to shared visioning and shared governance and affirms the fact that it is driving change across the institution. Other focus group members claimed that the process includes database decision-making and cross-functional teams to create a systematic approach to problem solving. Most importantly a

participant commented “AQIP offers a chance to look forward, not only record the past and AQIP’s focus on stakeholder needs is much more meaningful than traditional accreditation.”

Data

The administrative focus group claimed AQIP includes the collection of more data and there is an emphasis on using the data to make decisions.

Time

The administrators felt AQIP is a time-consuming process with many meetings. “The time is worth the effort because of the positive impact on the institution.”

Impact

The administrators claimed it is too early to determine the impact of the process on the college although there have been several activities that benefit the college over the last three years.

Mission

Some members of the administrator focus group decided that the mission of the institution is just words at this time. Others felt AQIP reinforces the quality commitment in EICCD’s mission statement as well as it focuses more on stakeholder needs. Another important comment is “AQIP keeps quality improvement ongoing and linked to the mission rather than focusing on accreditation every ten years.”

Teaching and Learning

The external feedback that is received through data collection helps the college to focus on areas that need improvement for better student performance.

Affinity Relationship Table – Administration

After discussion of the six affinities their cause and effect relationship was determined. The following table was created through consensus of the administration focus group.

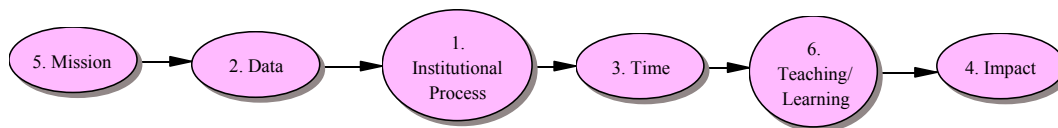
Table 11 – Administrator Affinity Relationship Table

Affinity Name	Possible Relationships
1. Institutional Process	$A \rightarrow B$
2. Data	$A \leftarrow B$
3. Time	$A \diamond B$ (No Relationship)
4. Impact	
5. Mission	
6. Teaching/Learning	

AFFINITY RELATIONSHIP TABLE							
AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP		AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP		AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP		AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP	
1 \leftarrow 2		1 \rightarrow 6		2 \rightarrow 6		4 \leftarrow 5	
1 \rightarrow 3		2 \rightarrow 3		3 \rightarrow 4		4 \leftarrow 6	
1 \rightarrow 4		2 \rightarrow 4		3 \diamond 5		5 \rightarrow 6	
1 \leftarrow 5		2 \leftarrow 5		3 \rightarrow 6			

The following System Influence Diagram (SID) or mind map was created using the cause and effect relationships provided in the table above. This SID reflects the composite of the administrative focus groups experience with regard to AQIP at EICCD.

Figure 8 - SID for Administrative Focus Group



Individual Interviews –Administration

Once the focus groups established the protocol, individual interviews were performed with administrators. The interview protocol presented a new set of affinities combined from the three focus groups. This list, shown below, represents the combined affinities used for both the administrator and faculty axial and theoretical phase interviews followed by axial phase responses from administrators.

- Participation
- Mission
- Process
- Data
- Measurement
- Impact

Participation

The interview protocol included an introduction to this affinity by the researcher: The focus groups used this affinity to describe the level of involvement of different areas of the college in AQIP and accreditation – tell me about your feelings of participation in traditional regional accreditation and AQIP. Most of the administrators interviewed agreed more faculty and staff participate with AQIP but one individual commented, “I’m not sure that I am seeing that big of a difference between participation in traditional accreditation and AQIP.”

A comparison of regional accreditation and AQIP yielded comments such as traditional accreditation “is really historical documentation of what has happened in say, the last ten years” and “it brings people together to talk about the college, then they don’t talk about in again until it comes up again.” AQIP is a process that is described as

ongoing and more focused. “The big difference I see is that the AQIP process drives improvement in your every day work situation so in some ways you have more people working on it.”

The tie that AQIP has to the quality movement was also mentioned as a positive aspect of the process. “AQIP is college-wide participation because the school is already practicing quality improvement” and “the participation level at EICCD with AQIP is extensive because at any given point improvement teams are working and it’s just seamless and fits right with the organizational culture.”

While participation does seem to have increased with AQIP, one interview respondent claimed most do not realize they are involved in an accreditation process. “The potential was there for many more people to be involved, but I think if you ask the average teacher, did you know you did something that applied to accreditation, they would say, not really. That’s the beauty of AQIP. It folds right into what you’re doing anyway.” Clearly both accreditation processes require involvement of college staff but according to most administrator interview respondents AQIP activities create an atmosphere of team participation that includes more of the college than traditional regional accreditation.

Mission

Mission was introduced to all interview respondents as the connection between accreditation (either regional or AQIP) and the EICCD mission. The interview respondents were asked to described their feelings of this affinity. It was reported that regardless of which accreditation model is used, “everything the institution does has to be value and mission-based.” One respondent drew a good comparison of the two types of accreditation studied, “In traditional regional accreditation you are looking at what the

accrediting team is going to value. In AQIP you really don't give a damn. You care about what you value and that's a big difference."

AQIP is described as an active process and the mission of the college should be an active statement. "The mission statement would be an active statement. It's a statement of responsibility and AQIP certainly is a model that is better suited to having active problem-solving and active reflection." Other responses included, "We have a management system of continuous quality improvement. It is woven in the mission of the college. We are concerned about customers, the students, and the stakeholders" and "I see AQIP as more in line with EICCD's mission. The mission talks about stakeholder satisfaction and improving quality. The old accreditation process didn't follow the mission as closely whereas AQIP, because you are emphasizing continuous improvement and the expectation is to get data from your stakeholders to respond to their needs, there's closer alignment between the mission and AQIP."

Process

This affinity consists of descriptions of the AQIP process as used at EICCD. Interview respondents described their feelings and experiences with the process as "evolving and most of the evolution is good. Part of it is not, and that is educators are trying to dominate it. And we are seeing education-ese drift into the process." Others felt that educators are trying to change AQIP so it does not sound like a "business" assessment tool. "So they are changing some of the verbiage of it and that is education-ese. It becomes more palatable to educators."

One respondent provided a detail of the AQIP process. "The process involves identifying the priorities that we believed were important for our organization, organizing teams around those important strategic areas then basically having those teams work at trying to develop solutions for problems or challenges that we believe impede progress

toward higher quality. We just went through a strategic planning session the other day and part of that process is having all those teams and their leaders report what the progress is and then determine what they should continue.”

Concerns with AQIP are that it is never completed and a small group of people initiate the process by defining the goals. “With the AQIP model there’s no sense that it’s ever done. That’s probably the way it should be because we are not ever done. The traditional model, when we were completed there is an opportunity to celebrate and I’ve not seen that yet” and “I think that it’s very important but I get concerned that there is no closure to the projects, no ability for those teams to go. I worry about the burnout rate. At the same time, what we’re doing is very important and we should be doing it.”

When the college started the process, a group of administrators and a board member attended meetings to define the institution’s direction and goals for AQIP. Some felt this was a flaw with the process. “I really had concerns about the way the initial goals were chosen by administrators who went to a conference. Those three people sat in a room and decided what our goals would be and how they would be measured.”

Despite the issues described previously, most of the interview respondents had favorable comments about AQIP’s processes. “It’s changed the way we make decisions, the way we approach problem solving. So as a result of the integration of those changes within the institution it’s kind of hard for me to say, this is AQIP and this is just our Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) initiative. They have melded for me in my head.” “AQIP has a lot to do with improvement in an institution and focusing on improving what is important to the organization. It’s not the accrediting agency telling you what you should be doing. Actually you are negotiating, you are communicating with the agency what is important and this is where we need to put our time, our energy, our staff focus and our resources to make us better so that we can serve students in the

community better.” “AQIP is what we do on a day in and day out basis and it’s been a very positive process for us. I think with the AQIP process too, it has been helpful to be able to look ahead.”

Data

Data is reflective of information gathered during AQIP activities and can be compared with traditional regional accreditation data. The interview respondents described their experiences with data gathering activities.

Most respondents described data gathering activities for regional accreditation as historic while AQIP’s data is ongoing and current. “For traditional accreditation we gather historic data, to prove that we were quality. For AQIP and for what we are now doing we gather data to improve our quality and the data is not any more historic than it has to be. It’s as live as we can make it and we really don’t care what other people think about our data, we care about whether the data is helpful or current in future decision making.” “I think in the traditional method we gather the data because we were told that’s what we needed to do and now we are gathering the data because we believe that’s what we need.” “In regional accreditation you look back at historical data and determine how good you were in the past.”

Concerns with data were that it was collected and not used by the college. “One of the frustrations I hear from the faculty is we collect all this data and then no one uses it. As we become more focused and rely on that information, I think we collect for specific projects or assessment pieces. In the first couple of years of AQIP, they just do a lot of baseline collection. So you are just starting to get that information out there and trying some new things, so it is difficult to see the impact.” “I think we need to be careful that we gather data that will help us to improve and allow that data to drive the

improvements as opposed to letting the gathering of data get in the way.” “With AQIP the data was focused and requested for a specific reason and is actually being used.”

AQIP has helped those involved in teams to use data to make positive changes. “Using AQIP at Eastern Iowa, it’s the first time that I saw data actually being used for decisions. The data came from the stakeholders rather than educators.” “With AQIP we have become more specific as to what we’re looking for. Instead of just saying we have all this data coming in, I think we’ve taken a different approach to say, what do we really need and how are we going to use it?” “The issue was whether or not the data was meaningful. The difference is that the AQIP process is forcing us to take a look at the data that is collected and determine what is meaningful data to drive decisions and to drive improvement with the processes. The difference between AQIP and traditional regional accreditation is the traditional model involves collecting that doesn’t drive change within an organization. AQIP on the other hand does.”

Measurement

Many respondents found it difficult to differentiate between data and measurement. Measurement was clarified for the respondents as outcomes, benchmarks, and goals used in the AQIP process regarding students and stakeholders.

One respondent reported measurement for AQIP would be done whether the college was involved or not. “AQIP stuff is just a new way of doing accreditation. We have been doing all the measurement before.” Despite this comment, AQIP was described as a process that is more aligned with the quality processes the college was already doing.

Baseline measurements are important to the AQIP process. “Initially it seems like AQIP is more related to collecting some of the baseline data and when to collect it and how to collect it. Once you’ve got it and you have a baseline established, then it’s what

are the goals and benchmarks and how should we identify them.” “With AQIP we have to really take stock in where we are, where we want to go and if we’ve made any type of headway towards that. I think it’s much more definitive measurement and it makes you really have to measure, whereas before I think we were pretty lax about it.”

Measurement is described as the most difficult step. “I think benchmarking is important but it’s difficult to find an exact match with your organization. It doesn’t do us a lot of good to benchmark against some of the other colleges within the state because we are a very different institution and we don’t compare well with them. I think you have to be cautious with benchmarking data because it can give you an indication that you are doing a very good job in comparison to those that you are benchmarking against.”

Other respondents noted the importance of both quantitative and qualitative measurements in AQIP. “Measurement is not just counting the number of students that transfer and the number of students that are successful. It’s looking at qualitative things.” “Another form of measurement used is best practices across the nation. Sometimes the best practices are a number and sometimes the best practice is a process. We searched to make sure we were doing both quantitative and qualitative measurement.”

Impact

Impact was described to each administrator interviewed as the effect that AQIP has on the institution, its stakeholders, and students. Some respondents claimed it is too early to see an impact. “I don’t think we’ve really felt the full impact. I think that’s still coming. I think that the institution as a whole feels more involved.” “I think that it’s too soon to have had an impact yet, but I truly believe that it will. I will use the transition teams as an example. We’re still kind of in the lets get our data act together phase. Once we know where we are then we can really begin to do things that have impact. But I really think this process will have the potential to actually do that.”

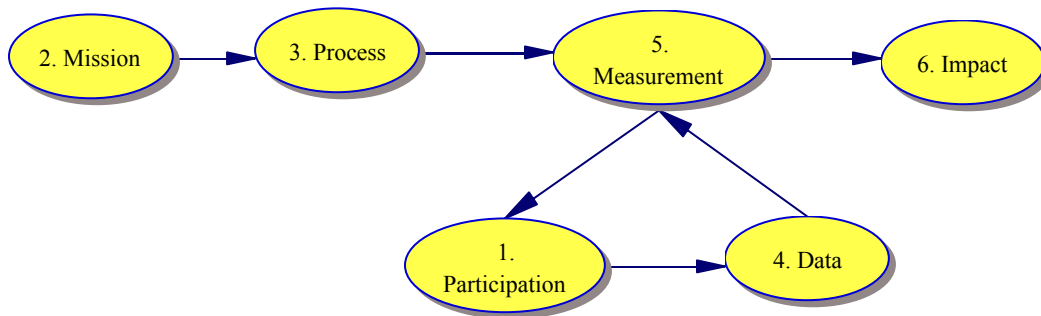
Although the college is nearing the end of its first three-year cycle many respondents reported that AQIP has impacted the institution in a positive way. “Well, the first impact that I’m most proud of is, unless under extreme pressure, we as an institution tend to look at problems as caused by systems or process, not by people.” “I think that AQIP has helped us to ask why we are doing things differently as opposed to doing things the way we’ve done. Short term, we need to make sure that everybody understands what we’re doing and why we’re doing it.” “I see impact in the sense that we are changing our environment, who we are, trying to be more data driven, trying to be more process oriented and so those are some good things that I see going on.” “The impact is organizational improvement with a focus on helping our students improve their success rate here, to reach their learning goals, their personal goals, their career goals.” “Certainly there has been an impact on employees as a result of AQIP. When we started AQIP they noticed there was a culture change happening. Administrators were using a different language. Employees were being empowered to make more decisions for the processes that they were dealing with.”

According to the administrators interviewed, employees seem to have more involvement with AQIP. “So the administrator lets go and allows the employees closest to the process to figure out how to improve it. But there are expectations for those involved.” “Employees have more say in the processes they deal with. There has been a whole climate change.”

Interview System Influence Diagram (SID)-Administration

The theoretical coding phase of the interviews provided rich descriptions of the affinities and their relationships and produced an administrator composite interview SID that will be compared to the focus group SID in Chapter 5. The following descriptions of each affinity are taken from the theoretical coding phase of the administrator interviews.

Figure 9 – SID for Administrators from Composite Interview



Mission

Our mission drives the work of 430 faculty, staff and administrators in our organization and our mission keeps us aligned with student success. Mission is the driving force for administrators in the AQIP process, affecting all other aspects of the system. “Team membership is dependent on the mission of the institution.” “Much of the culture is driven from your mission. Because of that it affects participation and people who understand that it is important for them to participate and get actively involved. It’s an expectation in the way we do business.” This relationship between mission and its affect on participation is also seen in AQIP activities. “Our mission guides a lot of what we do and because of our mission we are doing the AQIP process which drives participation.”

Process

If you don’t have a process where people can volunteer ideas for improvement or participate in an improvement team, then I guess it would not matter how much participation you had. Process is another affinity that drives EICCD’s accreditation system. “The process is there first and from that we set up teams on various campuses. We have the process before so more will participate.” The process also affects the measurement or benchmark that is used which affects the impact that AQIP has on the institution. “The process that our AQIP teams use drives the outcomes.

Your experiences are within the process and when we make changes in students' learning experience we will measure the outcome which will have an impact on their success and if not we will look at the process and change it again."

Measurement

Measurement drives the impact that AQIP activities have on the organization, whether or not we make changes. "If you select good targets and goals to measure your impact with, to measure your outcome with, and communicate it clearly, then you will have the opportunity to have a greater impact." "In AQIP we choose the participants based on who's going to collect information and measurement." "You have a metric that would suggest you need improvement somewhere, so you have to gather up your team and work toward that goal."

Participation

We can't do a process and not involve people. Participation is the affinity that affects the type of data collected and the impact that AQIP has on the institution. "The group defines what they need" and "members will likely change throughout the process which will affect the impact." "It has to do with how involved and how active the membership is on the team and what their ownership level is." "Within the AQIP groups that we have the participation is really driving the impact. They are identifying systematic approaches to changing processes."

Data

You can't measure anything without data. Data is the outcome of several affinities including participation. "Participation in a group affects the type of data that is collected." On the other hand, in the AQIP system represented in Figure 9, data affects the affinities' measurement and impact. "The data you collect helps you determine if

you've met your goals [measurement].” “If the data we’re collecting is way off it would definitely impact how we move forward with processes.”

Impact

We’re always striving to create change, to offer quality instruction and so AQIP should have an impact on outcomes. Impact is an outcome that is affected by all of the remaining five affinities. It is considered the primary outcome of the accreditation system at EICCD. “I’m saying that the relationship of what we do [with AQIP] has a great impact on the system.” “Participation on the AQIP teams impacts our process, including the process of student transfer, career transfer, developmental ed success, the quality of alternative delivery, all of it.” “We measure processes at the college in order to determine whether or not there is a significant impact on the organization.” “That process will have an impact, otherwise why do the activity?”

Part B – Faculty

Like the administration focus group the faculty focus group was read an issue statement describing accreditation. This statement was followed by information about AQIP and its implementation at EICCD. The focus group then developed more than 60 responses on index cards comprising of statements or a word descriptions of thoughts on the issues. The cards were sorted by the focus group members according to themes that arose. The themes, called affinities, were then named by the faculty focus group based on an identifying characteristic. The following list is the four affinities that emerged from the focus group made up of faculty with descriptions that resulted from the group discussion.

- Participation
- Data

- Process
- Evaluation

Participation

The focus group described this affinity in terms of involvement in regional accreditation and AQIP. The group felt that there is not equal participation among the three colleges and this leads to less buy in from faculty. Participation in cross- district AQIP teams has lead to increased conformity across the campuses and that is important for sharing information.

Data

Most of the faculty focus group claimed that data is needed in AQIP to determine how well the college is doing and what needs to be improved to make it better. All AQIP activities are linked to the data collected and some members felt AQIP has a way of making the institution look at itself as a systemic unit. According to one member, “traditional accreditation resulted in a different kind of data that was not always useful as compared to data collected for AQIP.” A criticism of the data is there is too much quantitative and not enough qualitative data gathered.

Process

This affinity is defined as the steps in AQIP’s three-year cycle and it is compared to traditional regional accreditation which is usually on a ten-year cycle. Comparing the two types AQIP is ongoing and in the past regional accreditation is completed and shelved for several years until the next visit. The focus group claimed that many populations are being surveyed with AQIP activities that were never assessed in the past. Some negatives are that AQIP is a somewhat rigid process with many steps that are constantly being changed. Some members of the faculty focus group believed there is limited personnel involvement and it is a time-consuming process.

Evaluation

Most of the faculty focus group felt that any type of evaluation is still evaluation. Traditional accreditation provides an evaluative document that is seldom read by anyone while AQIP calls for accountability on a constant basis. Some members wondered, “Is this a fad in research?”

Affinity Relationship Table-Faculty

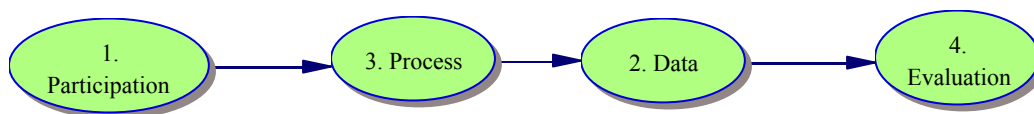
After discussion of the four affinities their cause and effect relationship was determined. The following table was created through consensus of the faculty focus group.

Table 12 – Faculty Affinity Relationship Table

Affinity Name 1. Participation 2. Data 3. Process 4. Evaluation	Possible Relationships $A \rightarrow B$ $A \leftarrow B$ $A \diamond B$ (No Relationship)
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AFFINITY RELATIONSHIP TABLE	
AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP	AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP
1 \rightarrow 2	2 \leftarrow 3
1 \rightarrow 3	2 \rightarrow 4
1 \rightarrow 4	3 \rightarrow 4

Figure 10 - SID for Faculty Focus Group



Individual Interviews-Faculty

Once the focus groups established the protocol, individual interviews were performed with faculty. The interview protocol presented a new set of affinities combined from the three focus groups. This list, shown below, represents the combined axial and theoretical phase affinities used for the faculty interviews followed by axial phase responses from faculty.

- Participation
- Mission
- Process
- Data
- Measurement
- Impact

Participation

This affinity was described to the faculty who were interviewed as the level of involvement of different areas of the college in AQIP and accreditation. The faculty generated a variety of responses worth noting for participation.

While it is reported that the college has made an effort to encourage participation some felt that it was not enough. “We are a 3 campus district it’s frustrating sometimes because there was not equal participation from all 3 campuses.” “There is no buy-in or they do not know enough about it. It is a fault that it is not explained better to the entire institution.” “Participation is hampered because you can get left out and not intentionally, but the jargon can seem to be over your head.” “I was here for the last NCA [North Central Association] traditional accreditation and people were asked to

participate and most people who were asked did get involved. With AQIP I don't think there are a lot of people who have been asked to get involved. Input is good with AQIP but not necessarily participation. With AQIP it has the potential to include more people from the bottom-up and the administration is trying to involve more people at the lower levels."

In contrast to the comments above, some responded that participation is very good at their particular college. "At my college we had 100% participation. There was grumbling about the amount of time it took but it was a good process. There was equal participation among staff and faculty but I was more involved with faculty." "My understanding of traditional accreditation is that you were asked to participate in areas that pertain to your job function. I think participation in AQIP has been a better. There is more participation and people are asked to be on teams and help define goals and needs. There is more faculty participation in AQIP."

Despite the varying levels of participation across the district, it was reported in the interviews that the college makes an effort to involve a variety of staff. "I think the college has made an effort to get people to volunteer but they can't force people. The problem is that there will be burnout with the same people doing a lot of the volunteer work. The college has done what it can do to encourage participation but I wish people at my campus were more responsive to it." "In AQIP I feel like I have been very much involved as far as participation in many steps of the way. There have been opportunities and faculty participation on a general level."

Mission

Faculty respondents were told this affinity describes the connection between regional accreditation, AQIP, and the EICCD mission. They were then asked to describe their ideas in relation to these three ideas.

Most faculty who were interviewed found AQIP to be aligned with the mission of the institution. “AQIP is aligned with the college’s mission but I do not think that traditional accreditation was. AQIP is continual. We look at the processes that we are doing and if modifications are needed they are made and later reviewed again.” “Continuous improvement is part of the district’s mission and that is the whole idea behind AQIP. The process is identifying where we can improve and setting forth a plan to do it.” “I think it fits well with the college’s mission. In the past we have done self-studies to find out if we are meeting the needs of the community and planning for the future, and AQIP is an extension of that.”

Some respondents reported AQIP has provided a connection to other areas of the district. “I think we tend to compartmentalize our tasks but AQIP has reminded us that we are a district rather than our departments or specific colleges.”

Process

Process was described to each interview respondent as consisting of descriptions of the AQIP process as it is used at EICCD. Gathering data and setting goals were the activities that took place in year one with continued measuring and adjustment of systems in the following years. Although some reported that the process was time-consuming, most felt that it was useful and brought people from diverse areas of the college together. Other comments follow.

“I think it is a good process it’s nice that everyone in the group has input and we can learn from each other. With the process, I was able to get to know other faculty members which is an added benefit for someone who is new to the institution.” “We look for consistent ways to measure projects or get the information from other schools. That was the first year’s work and also disseminating that information to faculty. Then in the third year we hope to find a way to integrate the effort into the colleges regular

processes. This will involve all faculty in AQIP.” “Most of what we have done with AQIP has constituted information gathering and identifying what we are doing that is meeting the AQIP criteria and brainstorming new projects. Some of us wish it would go faster and we want to see this stuff implemented but it is not a fault of AQIP, it is academia’s fault. It takes us forever to do anything.” “I like the idea of getting a unified answer from all 3 campuses. It is difficult to do this but it is accomplished through the district-wide teams in AQIP. We get a chance to see how we compare to one another and address the common district-wide mission.” “Traditional accreditation includes a lot of collection of information and I didn’t get a lot out of it. With AQIP you don’t get a final product but it continues to evolve and you see that evolution. It makes more sense to me than going backwards and saying ‘what did we do last time and what have we done now’.” “The process has made us more aware of how important participation is and improvement is not what one person can do or the administration alone.”

Some interview respondents felt the AQIP process is sometimes confusing and complicated. “Things in the AQIP process get so prescribed that they get confusing and it was hard to sometimes see a connection. That part of the process was not really valuable. It was not as meaningful and it is hard to get excited about continuing the process or getting people on board. That is partly jargon and partly process. We have really had a good experience with this especially working with people from the other campuses. It is energizing for me.” “At first it seems cumbersome but once you see the result and see where we are going with it AQIP seems more worthwhile.” “Our experience at EICCD is that initially people had a lot of reservations about the AQIP process, especially among faculty.”

Data

Data was described to those interviewed as being the information gathered during the AQIP process and can be compared to data gathered in traditional accreditation. Most faculty who were interviewed were concerned that the data is disseminated and used. Most agreed that AQIP activities involve the use of important institutional data.

“AQIP helps us to look at how we were collecting data, whether it was actually necessary to collect it, and who was going to collect it. We went from the traditional accreditation process of having one person collect it, to AQIP’s process of including faculty and staff in the data collection. We arranged a database that everyone collecting could input it and then any one person could go in and pull out what they needed at a certain point in time.” “We are sharing our data with each campus and then getting together district-wide to look at the data and make appropriate changes.” “The whole idea behind AQIP is to collect data that will be meaningful to the district and lead to improvement. In traditional accreditation the data is collected and it is not based on needs.”

According to the faculty, traditional regional accreditation data was gathered that was not disseminated or used. “In the past it has been gathered and never really used. Now it is being used for making changes. We are still working on its uses and how it can change systems.” “The college is collecting a lot of data that isn’t being shared with faculty, like how many students in my major transfer to other schools and graduate. I was not given that information even though the school was collecting it. It comes to certain departments and does not get shared.” “We have been able to gather data in the past but putting it to use was difficult. It is still a difficult task but the institutional researchers help teams use the data in AQIP.” “Data and measurement brought about

fear at first about how it might impact faculty in the classroom, but that has been dissipated and for the most part faculty understand the reason for collecting data.”

Measurement

This affinity was described to respondents as outcomes, benchmarks, and goals used in the AQIP process regarding students and stakeholders. Some respondents talked about the institution’s AQIP goals being set by a small group of administrators. This was a concern for some. “The goals were established by a group of a board member and some administrators from the district.” “When you have a real specific group like that, I am not sure how much in the 3-day conference that group can set goals for the 3 years. Can they be informed about the whole institution with such a small group?”

Within AQIP teams goals and benchmarks are set and changed when needed according to the respondents. “In my group we are just beginning to benchmark with preliminary data. We will decide if we should use that as the starting point for our improvements.” “We spent considerable time in a group looking at what we want our goals and benchmarks to be and how long we will measure. That was a very time consuming process but without it you can’t begin.” “AQIP’s benchmarking gave us direction because you can get sidetracked in a group and we always went back to the goals and benchmarks when we got off track.” “AQIP has made us aware that we are responsible for setting our own benchmarks and goals and improvement comes when we truly identify what needs to be changed.”

Impact

Impact was described to the interview respondents as the effect that AQIP has on the institution, its stakeholders, and students. The respondents were split on the impact of AQIP.

Some felt it was too early to determine an impact. “It is still really early in the process though to find out what will happen with it.” “It is too early to tell but AQIP has caused people to take a second look at what we are doing. It hasn’t changed students because it is too early in the process.” “Looking down the road it should have a positive impact on students but we are not sure at this time. As far as stakeholders there are a number of them. Some will benefit quickly and some will not be reached. Some people will not want to change at all. Some of those long-term faculty may resist change because they have not been required to stay current.”

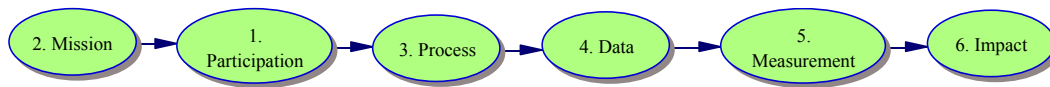
Others felt there was a positive impact in the way that the teams evaluate their specific processes. “I think the distance education team used surveys to make changes in the preliminary registration for online courses.” “The impact has been felt on the process that we have to go through to improve something. In retention we decided as a result of data that we must contact students and be more proactive about helping them improve their grades.” “We are involving more people in the AQIP process. I don’t know that our stakeholders are aware of AQIP but they will benefit from it through better programs and services. It has a positive effect on students and stakeholders.” “The biggest impact is getting people excited about AQIP and having them want to be involved. When I first started the process three years ago it was really hard to get people involved. They thought it was just another assessment process and it would be shelved after a few months of work. The pre-and post-testing that we have done has helped to measure student knowledge and if it does not increase then I must go back and reevaluate my teaching methods and the course.”

Interview System Influence Diagram (SID)-Faculty

The theoretical coding phase of the interviews provided rich descriptions of the affinities and their relationships and produced a faculty composite interview SID that will

be compared to the focus group SID in Chapter 5. The following descriptions of each affinity relationship are taken from the theoretical coding phase of the interviews.

Figure 11 – SID for Faculty from Composite Interview



Mission

Without our mission we would not have an idea about a process that fits the culture of the institution. As with the administrative interviews, the mission is the primary driver for the composite of the faculty interviews. The mission affects all other affinities in the AQIP system at EICCD. “Our mission of continuous quality improvement is aligned with AQIP.” “With AQIP I think we have to be careful of what data to collect and our mission should help guide that collection.” “The data collected and whom we collect data from is identified by the mission- it identifies internal and external stakeholders and what kind of data we need.” “The overall impact is in line with the mission of the institution. One part of it is to make students life-long learners and AQIP’s impact helps to build life-long learners through better processes and systems.” “The mission of the community college is to be student oriented –without that there would not be reason to participate in AQIP or accreditation. The college wants to make sure that what they are doing is benefiting students and the community and the mission is what drives us to say we want to be involved in the AQIP process because we want feedback to change and grow.”

Participation

When we get more people to participate in AQIP activities there is more valid measurements and it will make the impact stronger. Participation is another affinity that drives several others in Figure 11. Participation in AQIP activities drives the

collection of data and the creation of the benchmarks that ultimately change processes. “Those who participate determine what type of data is collected.” “We need people to participate to figure out the kind of outcomes and benchmarks we want.” “The groups involved with AQIP will determine what the measurements are because they are geared towards a function of the groups.”

Process

AQIP’s process includes collecting data, which is then used to change a system. Process is an important driver of EICCD’s accreditation system and includes all AQIP activities. Process affects other affinities and is affected by the mission of the institution and participation. “With AQIP you have a process in place and then you collect data using that process. It may change the process at a later date though.” “Within the process we may have determined that we want to look at 3 key areas like test scores, withdrawal rates, and future success. When we determine that is what we will study, our measurement is affected by those because they are benchmarked.” “In the AQIP process the way that we collect or analyze the data affects the impact that it has on the institution.”

Some interview respondents view the process as a weakness because it is complicated. “Maybe people do not participate because they feel the process is too cumbersome. They have done something like this before and there are not any major changes.” “If the person does not view the importance of the process then they are less likely to participate in AQIP.”

Data

With AQIP the data tells us what we need to change and work on. The faculty felt this affinity is an outcome of the accreditation system but still affects measurement and the impact of AQIP on the institution. “With AQIP we are learning

from the data in order to measure something at the college.” “If the data comes back that we are doing poor in relation to some measurement that will impact the system that needs improvement.” “With AQIP I think we have to be careful of what data to collect and our mission should help guide that collection.”

Measurement

If you do not set any goals you will not experience changes or impact in a positive way. You will be back with the traditional NCA accreditation model where you have some things that you have to meet but it isn’t necessarily improvement. Measurement drives impact but is dependent on data according to those faculty interviewed. “You need to have the measurement before you get the impact. Then you go back and start changing things based on that impact.” “We are learning from the data in order to measure something at the college.” “The groups involved with AQIP will determine what the measurements are because they are geared towards a function of the groups.” “With AQIP we are asked to create our own measurement to study things that are aligned with the mission.”

Impact

AQIP's process allows you to live what you are doing and see the results or the impact in the classroom or some other area of the college. This affinity is affected by all other affinities in Figure 11. It is considered the primary outcome of accreditation at EICCD. “The overall impact is in line with the mission of the institution. One part of it is to make students life-long learners and AQIP’s impact helps to build life-long learners through better processes and systems.” “In the AQIP process the way that we collect or analyze the data affects the impact that it has on the institution.” “If the data comes back that we are doing poor in relation to some measurement that will impact the

system that needs improvement.” “With AQIP we use benchmarks to improve and then measure that against the change to determine the impact.”

Part C – Professional Staff

Similar to administration and faculty, the professional staff focus group was read an issue statement describing accreditation as an evolving system, which has been criticized in the past. This statement was followed by information about AQIP and its implementation at EICCD. The focus group then developed more than 60 responses on index cards comprising of statements or a word describing their thoughts on the issues. The cards were sorted by the focus group members according to themes that arose. The themes, called affinities, were then named by the focus group based on an identifying characteristic. The following list is the five affinities that emerged from the focus group made up of professional staff with descriptions that resulted from the group discussion.

- Goals and Outcomes
- Daily Impact
- Data for Decision Making
- Continuous Process Improvement
- Teamwork

Goals and Outcomes

The professional staff focus group felt AQIP is concerned with student outcomes and focuses more on learning than traditional regional accreditation. It provides more meaningful measurements and is “action oriented.” The process holds the institution accountable by its emphasis on improving student learning through the use of benchmarking.

Daily Impact

The focus group claimed AQIP makes the improvement process part of everyday life at EICCD, which is completely different from traditional regional accreditation.

Data for Decision Making

Professional staff focus group members claimed, “AQIP forces those involved to seriously consider how and what type of data is gathered.” Not only is data gathered and reported but also the institution is held accountable to show how it is used to improve systems.

Continuous Process Improvement

The professional staff focus group claimed regional accreditation is written to gain accreditation and then is usually shelved for several years while AQIP is an ongoing exploration in quality. Implementing AQIP is a natural transition for EICCD because they have been doing quality improvement activities for almost a decade.

Teamwork

AQIP includes more district staff than traditional accreditation and it provides a framework for cross-functional teams rather than a team of administrators doing most of the work with traditional regional accreditation.

Affinity Relationship Table-Professional Staff

After discussion of the five affinities, their cause and effect relationship was determined. The following table was created through consensus of the professional staff focus group.

Table 13 – Professional Staff Affinity Relationship Table

Affinity Name	Possible Relationships
1. Goals and Outcomes	$A \rightarrow B$
2. Daily Impact	$A \leftarrow B$
3. Data for Decision Making	$A \diamond B$ (No Relationship)
4. Continuous Process Improvement	
5. Teamwork	

AFFINITY RELATIONSHIP TABLE					
AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP		AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP		AFFINITY PAIR RELATIONSHIP	
1 \rightarrow 2		2 \leftarrow 3		3 \leftarrow 4	
1 \leftarrow 3		2 \leftarrow 4		4 \rightarrow 5	
1 \leftarrow 4		2 \leftarrow 5			
1 \leftarrow 5		3 \leftarrow 5			

Figure 12 - SID for Professional Staff Group



Once the focus groups established the protocol, individual interviews were performed with administrators and faculty. Because the administration and professional staff focus groups were similar, the researcher decided to only interview administrators and faculty. Therefore there is not a composite interview mind map for the professional staff.

RESEARCH QUESTION #2 – HOW DO THE VIEWS COMPARE?

This research question includes interpreting the results of the focus groups and interviews. Interpretation is the purpose of Chapter Five and as such Research Question #2 will be answered in that chapter.

RESEARCH QUESTION #3 – IS THE MISSION OF THE INSTITUTION AFFIRMED AND ADVANCED BY AQIP’S QUALITY CRITERIA?

This question was addressed during the interviews. Each respondent was asked “Is the mission of the institution affirmed and advanced by AQIP’s Quality Criteria?”

Administrators

I think our mission is affirmed by AQIP, because it is helping us to better serve the needs of students and stakeholders. I do think in long term our work in AQIP will help us to be a better institution. There were a variety of responses to this question, most agreeing that AQIP affirms the institution’s mission. “Within the mission it does speak to the concept of customer service, meeting and exceeding the expectations of stakeholders. From the AQIP approach of quality improvement, I think that’s very much tied to our mission.” “We align the strategies based upon the data in our internal survey and external survey, what the data says and what our strategic initiatives should be, we form goals and they become our AQIP initiatives. So there’s the alignment. So what we’re doing is working at educational issues that are important to the students, the stakeholders, the community, and the institution.” “AQIP, you basically test everything you are doing against your mission to see if in fact you are within the bounds of that mission.”

Faculty

The mission and AQIP complement each other. Any self-evaluation we do is a benefit whether it is required or not because it checks to see if we are meeting the

needs of the people we are serving. According to faculty interviewed, the mission is also advanced by AQIP. “That is where we included our core values which match AQIP activities.” “They are the same. We look at what we are doing with AQIP and try to align those activities with the mission.”

RESEARCH QUESTION #4 – IS EACH AQIP ACTIVITY CLEARLY LINKED TO TEACHING AND LEARNING AND ITS IMPACT REALIZED?

Administrators

I believe that absolutely everything we do is linked to teaching and learning. As we look at the AQIP goals, I think they are linked to teaching and learning because they are either an input or an output of what we’re doing. “Well, all of them are linked to teaching and learning. Some more directly than others. But they all impact teaching and learning.” “They are all designed to be linked to teaching and learning and I think they are. Certainly the developmental education team is focused on teaching and learning. The alternative delivery team is focused on the teaching and learning, at least the satisfaction of the learning that takes place in the alternative format compared with the traditional format. The transition team activities are less directly related to teaching and learning but ultimately I think they will.” With the transfer team in particular, we’ve been gathering information about how our students do at more institutions than we had before and now that team is ready to dig deeper and ask why and what can we do about it. That definitely goes to teaching and learning. There is a direct link to what the students learn and how that impacts their placement and their successes is kind of down the road.”

Faculty

I think this time around we have seen it connected to teaching and learning, although we won’t know if it’s had an impact for 5-6 years. “I was really pleased when I saw this list of projects because I definitely think they are all tied to teaching and

learning.” “Its linked and we are seeing the impact more all the time. It is such a new process and some of the impact will come later on but there are little impacts.” “I don’t think everything has to be linked to teaching and learning but what I think it needs to be tied to is students and meeting their needs as well as community needs. I feel that teaching is very little of what we do in a community college. I feel that what we do is facilitate learning and its the student’s responsibility to learn with us helping in any way we can and the college’s responsibility is to provide an environment where that can be done.”

Some faculty are concerned with AQIP’s roots in continuous improvement. “Continuous improvement infringes on academic freedom and the rights of the faculty to do what they need to do in the classroom. Until we are able to get to a point where we move it into the classroom, we are only going to have minimal effects on what we call our primary vision and mission which is teaching and learning.”

RESEARCH QUESTION #5 – IS THE DISTRICT MAKING USE OF EXTERNAL FEEDBACK THAT GOES BEYOND THE CONFINES OF ITS OWN EXPERIENCE AND FACULTY?

Administration

We are comparing our data with external data. In fact, data about ourselves is used only to compare with the past and more important to compare with other institutions that are as good or better than we are. Administrators felt data is gathered from a variety of sources outside the college. “I think we gather external data from different places. We try to find national best practices. What are other people doing? What works for them? I think people are willing to go to other campuses and talk to colleagues.” “We have a very elaborate system where we gather data from advisory committee membership, from our faculty members, from the people who hire from us, from the lay-citizens about the health of the community colleges. We do an

environmental scan and all of that information is basically shared with faculty and the staff and the administration.” “Comparable data is really required in this process. You have to take a look at our team process of improvement which requires us to benchmark ourselves against other colleges like in the state that we’re in and also nationally.” “This process forces you to drive externally for data but also you want to assess programs, coursework, program work, data from other programs. And that forces the teams to deal with faculty and staff from other institutions.” “We’ve already applied for a quality award and received external feedback and we’ve incorporated into our planning and we’re submitting our second application this year for other external feedback. We’re also going to submit a national Baldrige application.” “We have an idea of what we think we’re doing and I think it’s incredibly important to see what the community outside of our confines feels that we are doing. That’s important for us to listen to and to respond to.” “We’re trying to benchmark best practices and I think we finally identified a group of schools that are similar to us, so that we can benchmark best practices rather than, get data from the state that says here is the average and we compare ourselves to the average.”

One administrator felt external feedback is an area that needs improvement. “I think that the external feedback is a challenge for us.”

Faculty

We are using qualitative discussion from former students to make changes at EICCD. Faculty had mixed responses about feedback. Most believed external feedback is gathered and used. “Community colleges are really good at doing that because of the population that we work with and our mission statement. The mission of a community college is so different than that of a university, because of that and our community orientation we must rely on feedback from outside our college for direction.” “Yes,

before we can do anything we must go out and research best practices of other colleges across the nation and then we come back to the team and report what was found.” “Yes. We look at different college processes and we talk with those agencies that hire our graduates. In the nursing program we get evaluations of former nursing students and they provide information about hospital accreditation needs of staff so that it can be tied to classroom instruction.” “We make a lot of decisions based on community climate surveys including what programs to offer.”

One faculty person had an issue with the sharing of external feedback. “I think that external data is coming in but it is not discussed college-wide or disseminated college-wide or with faculty. That is what my team has been finding.”

CONCLUSION

The AQIP process was researched through focus groups and interviews in order to determine whether the process is a more positive form of accreditation. Five research questions guided the study:

- How do administration, faculty, and professional staff view AQIP as compared with traditional regional accreditation practices?
- How do the three views compare?
- Is the mission of the institution affirmed and advanced by AQIP’s Quality Criteria?
- Is each AQIP activity clearly linked to teaching and learning and its impact realized?
- Is the district making use of external feedback that goes beyond the confines of its own experience and faculty?

Three focus groups made up of administrators, faculty, and professional staff along with interviews provided the qualitative data to answer the questions above. All were addressed in this chapter with the exception of “How do the views compare?” This research question will be answered in Chapter Five, which is an interpretation of the results presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE - ANALYSIS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

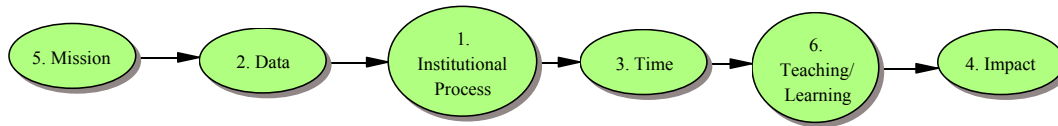
The results of the three focus groups described in the previous chapter along with individual interview responses provide a necessary segue to the interpretations found in this chapter. Another goal of this chapter is to draw out implications to solve problems or generate interesting questions for further study (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). The purpose of this study is to create SIDs or mindmaps of how faculty, administrators, and professional staff at Eastern Iowa Community College District understand the phenomenon of accreditation.

The SIDs provide phenomenological perceptions of accreditation at EICCD and was created using interactive qualitative analysis (IQA) methodology. IQA is an open approach where the literature serves as a lens through which we view the results of the study (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). When comparing the SIDs it is important to revisit the literature review and critique it against the SIDs and search for additional sources. This comparison will help to answer the final research question “How do the views compare?”

ANALYSIS - PERCEPTIONS OF ADMINISTRATORS

Those administrators involved in the initial focus group were read an issue statement about regional accreditation and asked whether AQIP focuses more on quality when compared to traditional regional accreditation. The focus groups’ comments were used to produce the interview protocol. Perceptions recorded in the individual interviews further defined the system and produced a theory of AQIP and accreditation at EICCD. The following is an analysis of the two administrator SIDs (mind-maps).

Figure 13 - SID of Administrative Focus Group



As the diagram shows, the mission of the institution is the main driver of the accreditation system at EICCD with the impact of the process being the outcome. The mission is said to drive the type of data collected and the process that is used. All processes are bound by the mission and the AQIP criteria allow the institution to study areas of growth and improvement (NCA, 2000). Baker (2002) claimed all institutional evaluation begins with the mission and goals.

AQIP is described as being very data-driven. Data is a very important component of the AQIP process as well as with traditional accreditation. Data collection and measurement are part of each of the nine AQIP criteria and include collecting, storing, retrieving, and interpreting data for continuous improvement of the entire system (NCA, 2000). What makes the two forms of accreditation different is that data collected for AQIP is used to make changes while it was reported the data collected for traditional regional accreditation was not always used for any process or programmatic changes.

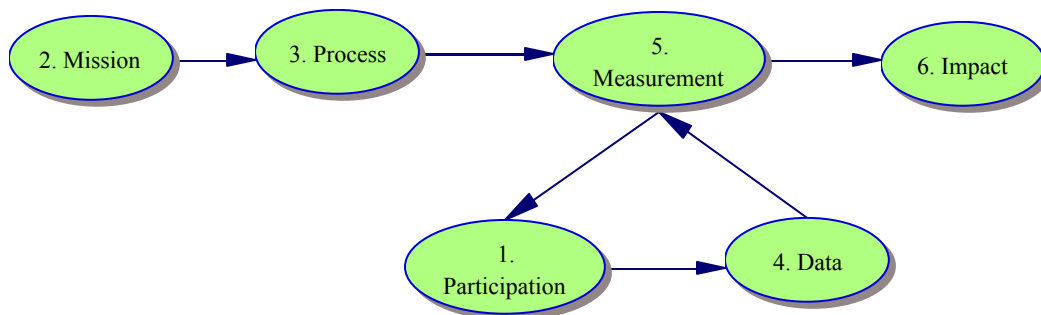
Time is also a factor of accreditation at EICCD. The AQIP process requires a large time commitment and that is sometimes a negative factor of the process. Both faculty and administrator interview respondents mentioned AQIP is a time-consuming process, although, for many the time commitment is worth the effort because of the positive benefit reaped by the institution.

Mission, data, institutional process, and time all affect the next affinity, teaching and learning. When those affinities are put into motion, the result is often a change relating to some aspect of teaching and learning. The view is that everything (or almost everything) at the college has to do with teaching and learning. The processes and

systems that are studied and changed as a result of AQIP will affect teaching and learning in some way. According to Ewell (1998) it is very important to have a systemic view of the institution because all parts of the college affect each other and are interrelated.

Finally the impact is the primary outcome of the accreditation system at EICCD. There are mixed feelings about the impact of AQIP activities and action projects chosen at the beginning of the first three years. It may be too early to tell, however, there are many residual impacts such as changes in assessment practices and teams working cross-district. According to the NCA (2003) a goal of AQIP was to involve more faculty and staff in accreditation. Processes have also been streamlined and unified across the district, which makes it easier for the three colleges to work together and share information.

Figure 14 - SID of Composite of Administrator Interviews



The composite of the administrator interviews in Figure 14 shows an interesting phenomenon. While it is similar to the focus group SID in that mission is the driver and impact is the primary outcome, there is a feedback loop in the center that deserves investigation.

Again, the mission of the institution is the primary driver. Interview respondents claimed that mission drives all aspects of the college including accreditation activities. The mission is tied to assessment and continuous quality improvement, which explains

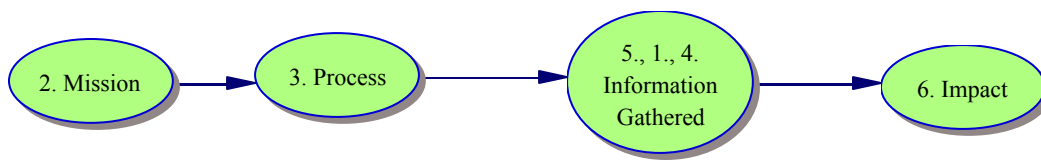
the connection of AQIP, which is grounded in Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award.

The feedback loop includes measurement, participation, and data. According to Northcutt and McCoy (2001) feedback loops contain at least three affinities with each affinity influencing the other. The distinction between the drivers and outcomes is usually indistinguishable in a feedback loop. In Figure 14 measurement is affected by the mission of the institution and the process. For example, AQIP fits well into EICCD's mission and the process used will affect the type of measurement collected.

Within the feedback loop the type of measurement needed affects who will participate in the process and that will ultimately affect the type of data collected. AQIP teams collect data based on the process studied. Many administrators interviewed claimed traditional accreditation provides data that is never used. Baker (2002) wrote colleges "may find themselves in a position of being data-rich and information poor" (p. 5). According to Figure 14, data collected in AQIP may bring about an impact but before that happens a benchmark or goal may need to be changed which can lead to new participants. This is the nature of the feedback loop in Figure 14.

Since the three elements of the feedback loop comprise a separate micro-system within the SID, it is possible to zoom out of the feedback loop shown in Figure 14. Zooming involves naming the feedback loop with one descriptor that replaces the individual ones (Northcutt and McCoy, 2001). The mind-map in Figure 15 is an example of a "zoomed-out" or "telephoto" mind map of the composite administrator individual interviews.

Figure 15- SID of Administrative Composite Interview – Telephoto View

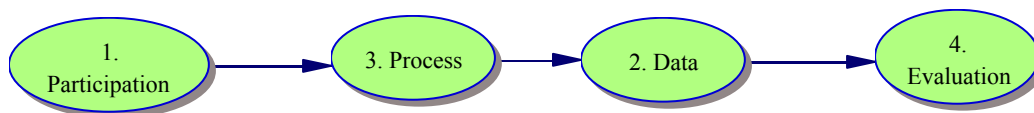


Measurement, Participation, and Data are combined to form an affinity called Information Gathered. Figure 15 has produced a higher-level perspective of the accreditation system at EICCD that is also more simplified. Mission and process still drive the system with information gathered affecting the primary outcome impact. It is also important to note most faculty and administrators interviewed felt measurement and data were the same affinities. This affirms the telephoto view of accreditation in Figure 15.

PERCEPTIONS OF FACULTY

The faculty focus group was also read an issue statement about regional accreditation and asked whether AQIP focuses more on quality when compared to traditional regional accreditation. The faculty focus group's comments along with administrator and professional staff focus groups were used to produce the interview protocol. Perceptions recorded in the individual interviews further defined the system and produced a theory of AQIP and accreditation at EICCD. The following is an analysis of the two faculty SIDs (mind-maps).

Figure 16 - SID of Faculty Focus Group



Participation is the primary driver of the faculty focus group SID. According to faculty this affinity drives the accreditation system at EICCD, because without people on the teams and administrative support there would be no process. There does not seem to

be equal participation in AQIP activities across the three colleges in the district. According to Rogers (1994), “Faculty have not been willing to take time from teaching and learning to do assessment, or to use its results to modify their method” (p. 5). This may also be caused by a lack of information about AQIP and the impact that it has on the district. It was reported by faculty interviewed if college employees do not understand the AQIP process, they are less likely to participate. Thus there may be a lack of information available about AQIP at EICCD.

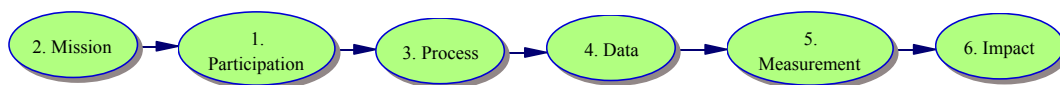
The process was discussed by faculty using a comparison of AQIP and traditional regional accreditation. The process for regional accreditation includes the preparation of a document describing the college. Once re-affirmation has been awarded the document is usually shelved for several years until the next accreditation visit. Regional accreditation standards are specific and limit creativity within an institution (Semrow, Barney, Frederick, Frederick, Robinson, and Pfnister, 1992). On the other hand, AQIP is ongoing with a continual process that is sometimes described as rigid and time-consuming. This rigidity may be the “glue” that keeps the process going. An ongoing process requires more time than one that is attended to every ten years.

Data is the next affinity in the system. Data collection is the main activity in AQIP and it is a very time consuming activity. It is an outcome of participation and the process yet it affects evaluation of the system. Data is very important and AQIP activities include the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Glidden (1999) wrote “accreditors . . . adopted a philosophy [in the late 1990s] of reducing their reliance on resource measures and quantitative standards to the extent possible and striving instead to determine whether students are being prepared adequately” (p. 5). Faculty believe in the importance of qualitative data and criticize regional accreditation’s reliance on quantitative information.

According to the faculty focus group, the primary outcome of the accreditation system is evaluation. Although there are several positive aspects about AQIP, many believe “assessment is assessment” and regional accreditation and AQIP are simply two ways to assess the college. They agree that AQIP evaluates systems on a daily basis while regional accreditation is a look at the college every ten years.

A comparison of the faculty focus group mind-map and the faculty interview mind map reveals two SIDs with similarities and differences.

Figure 17 - SID of Composite of Faculty Interviews



Both faculty SIDs have more commonalities in the center of their mind maps. Process is a driver of the system in Figure 16 as well as Figure 17. Also, data is an outcome in both systems. In Figure 16 evaluation, which is described as the primary outcome, can be used to describe the entire system. It could also be the impact of the accreditation system, which would match the mind map in Figure 17.

PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL STAFF

The professional staff focus group was read the issue statement describing regional accreditation and criticisms of the current system. The group was then read the research questions and some introductory information about AQIP. At that point they began to think about accreditation at their institution, recording their thoughts on note cards. The professional staff focus group’s comments combined with administrator and faculty focus group information was used to create the interview protocol. At that point a decision was made by the researcher not to interview professional staff because their focus group SID shown in Figure 18 matched the Administrator Focus Group SID in Figure 14.

CPI, the driver in the professional staff focus group is aligned with mission, which is the primary driver in the administrator focus group SID. Data is also a driver in both SIDs and impact is the primary outcome. Teamwork was the descriptive title given to the next affinity by professional staff but included phrases that described the AQIP process. Therefore, it matches the process affinity in the administrative focus group.

Figure 18 - SID of Professional Staff Focus Group



Assessment is an important component of CPI. Baker (2002) wrote institutions are “expected to assess . . . [themselves] in a regular, systematic, and substantive manner, and thus, provide evidence of the achievement of intended outcomes” (p. 4). EICCD has been doing continuous process improvement for more than a decade. CPI is embedded in the culture of the institution and driven by the mission. It also drives the system because AQIP is also grounded in CPI.

Teamwork is a driver of this system. Without it data could not be collected and it would be void of outcomes (measurement) or an impact on the institution. To complete AQIP activities there must be involvement from cross-district teams. Also internal feedback encourages involvement from a diverse group of individuals. Internal and external feedback are components of measurement. AQIP encourages the use of external feedback, which is gathered from many sources, and leads to better systems and programs at EICCD. Ewell (1998) claimed it is important to include the public in higher education.

According to faculty data and outcomes are the only way to know the level of impact AQIP is having on the institution.

HOW DO THE VIEWS COMPARE?

Comparing the administrator and faculty composite interview SIDs is important to answer the research question “How do the views [of the different constituencies] compare?”

Mission is a primary driver for both SIDs and drives all processes at EICCD including accreditation and AQIP. Both the faculty and administrators viewed process as another driver of the system while the faculty composite SID indicated participation, as an outcome of the accreditation system claiming the type of measurement needed affects who will participate in AQIP activities. Data and measurement were clearly outcomes of each composite with the primary outcome being the impact that AQIP has on the institution.

Clearly faculty and administration have similar views of the AQIP system at EICCD. This makes intervention in the system more congruent across the district.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of the accreditation system provided by those interviewed, two important recommendations can be made. First faculty contend there needs to be more cross-district involvement. The mind map in Figure 17 shows a potential weakness between participation and process. These are important affinities because they are drivers of the system. EICCD should appoint a committee of faculty and staff involved in accreditation activities to design an AQIP information training session for in-service and district meetings. It should also be part of the required training in CPI that all new employees receive. The AQIP session should be mandatory otherwise many elect not to attend. Interview respondents claimed people do not participate in AQIP because they do not understand the process. Orsmond and Stiles (2002) claimed, “a prime role of staff development is to encourage staff to be at ease with the notion of mixing approaches [to

assessment]” (p. 253). They also suggested that staff developers act as facilitators allowing faculty and staff to transform their practice.

Information about AQIP can also be disseminated through recognition ceremonies. EICCD administration should recognize and commend those who have been instrumental in the first three years of AQIP. Showcasing the impact of each team’s efforts may encourage others to become involved.

Information about AQIP should also be combined with an AQIP mentor recruitment program. College employees currently on AQIP teams should be required to recruit at least one new member during the next three-year cycle and mentor them in AQIP activities at the college. Gray and Smith (2000) described a good mentor as someone who possesses appropriate professional attributes, knowledge, good communication skills and the motivation to teach and support others. Also having a mentor will mean learning is more likely to be planned and meaningful to EICCD employees.

This is an ideal time to recruit new members because the college is completing its first cycle and gearing up for the next three years. New action projects will be chosen and teams will be reformed for these projects.

CONCLUSION

AQIP is still in its infancy which means it is evolving as the six charter institutions as well as those schools who enrolled later, provide feedback on their activities. As the original six colleges enter their next three-year cycle the impact of their action projects will begin to take shape and more data will be available.

AQIPs foundation in continuous quality improvement makes some educators nervous because they are afraid of the pendulum swinging to far in the direction of the continuous quality paradigm. Administrators implementing AQIP should not get bogged

down in zero tolerance and remember to value people and their accomplishments. If the ultimate goal is to continually improve, that may become the focus at all costs. The consequences of being too myopic could result in employees circumventing the spirit of the quality movement by lying, cheating, and worrying about taking risks. If staff feel they will be reprimanded for trying something new that does not succeed the institution will be affected negatively. One must remember the goal of AQIP is increase quality and prevent these dynamics within an appropriate focus on the broader perspective.

Leadership becomes vital to the implementation of the AQIP process. It must be instituted in a way that embraces the mission, promotes risk-taking, and fosters an overall improvement in participation of the Academic Quality Improvement Project. If faculty and administration are not inspired for the right reasons then students and stakeholders will be left behind in order to achieve higher test scores, increased retention, or other unrealistic objectives. The nature of a quality education where people are the product is not the same as running a business where the goal is to produce widgets with a sixth sigma orientation.

Faculty, administrators, and professional staff see AQIP as an accreditation process that fits well with the mission and the culture of the institution, however, the college was a quality institution before it enrolled. AQIP is a tool used by the college to further its quality mission with several beneficial impacts beside the action projects. Faculty and staff feel more involved in accreditation, they are interacting with other colleges and programs in the district, and they are collecting data that is useful and shared.

Two important areas of future study must be highlighted. Future researchers should continue to investigate the six charter institutions as they complete additional AQIP cycles to document the impact that their chosen action projects have on their

institutions and higher education including students and stakeholders. Were processes changed and improved or does it continue to be difficult to measure the impact of an institution that is continually striving for a level of quality that may never be attainable?

Another potential study is a comparison of the reasons why institutions elect to continue traditional regional accreditation compared to reasons why colleges elect to become AQIP institutions. This was a question raised during an interview and one that the researcher could not answer with this study.

Both ideas are important and merit further study. Accreditation is seen by many as the measure of a college's quality. Institutions of higher education must continually assess themselves against some measure of quality in order to successfully educate the future workforce. The public, legislators, institutions of higher education, and governmental agencies are watching to see if AQIP is the assessment process that will bring about a higher level of quality or if it is just the latest "fad" in assessment.

Appendix

AQIP QUALITY CRITERIA #3:

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS' NEEDS

- gathering, analyzing, and using information about the needs, preferences, and requirements of students and other stakeholders; the value they place on institutional services and activities; and the basis they use for judging institutional performance
- establishing, articulating, publicizing, maintaining, and reviewing targets for student performance (learning, behaviors, values, activities, etc.)
- maintain useful relationships with students, former students, and other stakeholders
- communicating to the public
- forming and using advisory committees

Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs invites an institution to analyze and improve how it:

- determines the requirements, expectations, and preferences of its students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders
- uses this information to understand stakeholders' current needs, to anticipate their future needs, and to create an overall climate conducive to learning for all
- identifies and involves its stakeholders in its mission, vision, planning, and evaluation systems
- builds relationships with its stakeholders
- determines and enhances stakeholders' satisfaction with its activities and results in order to improve current educational services and support planning

Questions to help you study your institution using this criterion:

A) Description/Overview

- i) Describe how you define, differentiate, and analyze your student and other stakeholder groups?
- ii) Who are your major stakeholders, and what are their short- and long-term requirements and expectations? How have you identified these needs?
- iii) Describe your system for handling complaints and for communicating back to dissatisfied students and other stakeholders. Explain your system for learning from their complaints which of your processes and services might be improved?

B) Process

- i) How do you build and maintain a relationship with your stakeholders? On what is the relationship based? How do you follow-up with students and other stakeholders' after they have interacted with you?
- ii) How do you provide stakeholders with easy access to information or services?

C) Outcomes

- i) How do you determine your stakeholders' satisfaction with your performance? What data or information do you use to know you are meeting your stakeholders' needs? How do you determine satisfaction relative to your competitors and to other similar organizations?
- ii) How do you involve your stakeholders in envisioning and preparing for your future? What feedback do you give them on their contribution?
- iii) How effectively are you satisfying your students' and stakeholders' needs, requirements, and preferences? What measures do you use? How do your results in these areas compare with those of other higher learning providers?

D) Process Improvement

- i) How do you ensure the systematic improvement of the processes by which you understand the needs of your students and other stakeholders? How do you establish and maintain with these groups relationships that will enhance your processes for understanding their needs and expectations?

Organizational Areas to Consider Under this Criterion

Advisory and focus groups Analysis of constituents, communities of interest, or stakeholders Board-designated mission or purposes Census information Community polls and surveys	Image and brand identification Market segmentation and analysis Parents needs and requirements Partner institution and organization needs and requirements Political trend analysis
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Demographic trend analysis Employer needs and requirements Feeder schools' needs	Specialized accreditors State and Federal government expectations Student and alumni surveys
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Vita

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